

Who Killed B. B. Homemaker?

Normative and Critical Whiteness in Beyoncé's Music Videos

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: The Multiplicity of Performances of Whiteness .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Defining Whiteness.....	8
Embodying Whiteness .....	10
Racial Performativity .....	11
Performing in Whiteface.....	14
<b>Chapter 2: Desperate Housewives—Symbolic Whiteface .....</b>	<b>21</b>
“If U Seek Amy,” or the unbearable whiteness of Britney .....	26
“Why Don’t You Love Me?” .....	31
<b>Chapter 3: Towards A Performance of Authenticity .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Pretty Hurts .....	39
Mine .....	44
No Angel.....	48
Conclusion .....	53
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Appendix A: Images .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>69</b>



# List of Figures

Fig. 1 Beyoncé as robot .....	57
Fig. 2 A Coy Gaze .....	57
Fig. 3 “And I got ass” .....	58
Fig. 4 Pristine Britney, Pristine House, Dirty Men .....	58
Fig. 5 The Perfect Mother .....	59
Fig. 6 As B.B. Homemaker.....	59
Fig. 7 “Don’t have to ask no one to help me out” .....	60
Fig. 8 Diandra Forrest looks at how thin she is .....	60
Fig. 9 Shaun Ross Measures Beyoncé .....	61
Fig. 10 Beyoncé vomits .....	61
Fig. 11 The dieted and trained body .....	62
Fig. 12 Whiteface Pietà.....	62
Fig. 13 Pietà, Michelangelo .....	63
Fig. 14 The Lovers .....	63
Fig. 15 The Lovers, René Magritte .....	64
Fig. 16 The Creation of Adam .....	64
Fig. 17 The Creation of Adam, Michelangelo .....	65
Fig. 18 Fairfax Natives .....	65
Fig. 19 RIP Cheeto Pat .....	66
Fig. 20 RIP Eman.....	66
Fig. 21 In Loving Memory.....	67
Fig. 22 RIP Keno .....	67



# Abstract

This thesis focuses on the ways that Beyoncé traverses the boundaries between black and white. In his oft-quoted maxim from *White*, Richard Dyer states the goal of his book: to make whiteness strange. Using the lenses of critical whiteness studies, and performance studies, I mark the ways in which Beyoncé, one of the pre-eminent pop star of our time, uses her music videos to relate to whiteness, and, ultimately, to distance herself from whiteness. My thesis presents an arc in Beyoncé's career: from much more normative performances of whiteness, to a new aesthetic, rooted in rap culture. This emphasizes the transience of race, and further stresses just how much of race is based, not on skin tone, but on performance. Beyoncé embodies and performs a tension that I explore throughout my thesis: how can someone, in particular a black person, embody whiteness?





For my families, near and far.



# Introduction

When I first saw the music video for Beyoncé's song "Why Don't You Love Me?" several years ago, I sensed immediately that there was something strange happening. Why, I wondered, had Beyoncé chosen to perform June Cleaver, Bettie Page, the French maid, a series of tropes that depict white women? I have spent the past three years studying race, and the past four studying theatre, and critically considering performances of whiteness, in part because of that certainty that I felt when I saw that video, and my subsequent struggle to articulate it. My questions led me to the field of critical whiteness studies, a subsection of race studies that critiques whiteness and ideally forces whites to consider their own privileged positions. While some accuse critical whiteness studies of naval-gazing, I strongly believe that critical self-reflection is vital for white people who want to both consider how whiteness is constructed, and to challenge its position as the cultural norm and default.

At the beginning of my sophomore year at Reed I took a class with Professor Catherine Ming T'ien Duffly called "Race and Identity in American Theatre." While many of the conversations that we had in that class helped to shape the way that I discuss race, I was shaken by one conversation that we did not have. We read Sam Shepard's play *Buried Child*, in which there are no people of color; there are only white people. The play does not specify that they are white, and yet, they are. While on other days in the class we discussed how the texts we read represented or challenged our notions of race, on that day the students in the class seemed to want to discuss the play as just a play. Suddenly, reading a play that was written about white people, but without ever saying that they were white, my classmates and I struggled to discuss race, and instead discussed representations of disability, of masculinity, and of Midwestern-ness. Realizing, as a young college student, that it was possible, in fact that it was likely, that intelligent white people were incapable of conceptualizing of their own whiteness, of the fact that we are raced, just as others are, made me reconsider my own position as a white person.

I haven't solved the issue of whiteness in the intervening years, and this thesis does not attempt to do so either. Instead, I am trying to ask some of the questions that

gave me pause when I first saw “Why Don’t You Love Me?” that led me to where I am now. Why do black artists choose to perform whiteness? Is a black woman performing white womanhood always a rebellious act? A political act? How can we discern between normative performances of whiteness, and transgressive performances of whiteness? Should we? And, the crucial question: if whiteness can be put on and appropriated by those who are not white, then what is it? What *creates* whiteness?

In this thesis I look at some very specific examples of one specific black woman performing whiteness. I draw these examples from a span of several years, but they all center around one person: Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. Beyoncé (I will refer to her by the mononym, as this is how she usually is discussed) is a cultural force, a star of almost mind-boggling proportions. Beyoncé has won 20 Grammy awards, and has been nominated 53 times, making her the second most awarded female artist by the Grammys. In 2014 she was on the cover of TIME Magazine for its list of the 100 most influential people of the year, the same year she was named the most powerful celebrity by Forbes Magazine.<sup>1</sup>

In popular culture, Beyoncé’s fans are known as the Beyhive, and they include not only her many “average” followers, but also myriad celebrities. Beyoncé is someone who, for whatever reason, it is more than okay to love: it is expected. Popular figures are expected to show devotion to Beyoncé. The Beyhive is the reason why Beyoncé has 14 million followers on Twitter, 29.1 million followers on Instagram, and almost 63 million likes on Facebook. Beyoncé is seen as a queen, a goddess and more by her followers. There is a well-known Twitter account called Beyoncé Fanfiction that posts tweets like “Beyoncé overhears a conversation about God’s gender. She smirks and takes a sip of Perrier. It turns into wine upon grazing her lips.”<sup>2</sup> I share this in my introduction to stress the sort of discourse that swirls around Beyoncé. While Beyoncé Fanfiction is a facetious take on Beyoncé’s cultural position, the tweets also speak to a greater truth about

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<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Pomerantz, “Beyoncé Knowles Tops The FORBES Celebrity 100 List,”

<sup>2</sup> Beyoncé Fanfiction, Twitter Post, May 21 2014, 10:41 AM, <https://twitter.com/BEYONCEFANFIC>.

Beyoncé: she is not one of us, she is better. She embodies, for many of her fans, the very concept of “flawless.” She manages to go beyond human, into something much more.

This has not always been true. Beyoncé began as a losing contestant on *Star Search*, and went on to be a member of a very successful girl group called *Destiny’s Child*. She later began a solo career. Beyoncé has been popular for well over a decade now, but she did not reach the incredible height of her career until after her album *4* was released in 2011. In 2012 she performed at the second inauguration of President Barack Obama, and in 2013 she performed at the Super Bowl halftime show. Somehow, perhaps over the course of the *Mrs. Carter World Tour*, without most people being aware of it, Beyoncé had gone from a popular and well-regarded pop star to the person whose name appears when you Google “biggest celebrities.” In December of 2013 Beyoncé released her self-titled album on iTunes without any promotional material—not even an announcement. The album, which is also sometimes called the visual album, included at its release a music video for every song. While artists have released visual albums before, the method of release, combined with Beyoncé’s star factor, made the album sensational.

Beyoncé’s music videos have been popular for a long time. Several cultural critics and theorists have written about Beyoncé’s videos: *The New York Times* called the video for “Why Don’t You Love Me?” “ingenious,” and pointed to it as a harbinger of the return of the music video.<sup>3</sup> Kanye West once famously said of “Single Ladies:” “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time!”<sup>4</sup> Beck, after winning Album of the Year at the 2015 Grammys over Beyoncé commented, “I thought she was going to win. Come on, she’s Beyoncé!”<sup>5</sup> Scholars like Carol Vernallis, Robin James, Madison Moore and Kevin Allred have written chapters and articles, and taught classes on Beyoncé’s music videos. Even Skeleton Crew, (the band that beat Beyoncé on *Star Search*) said of Beyoncé, “This

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<sup>3</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “Forbidden Sights,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Taylor Swift: Kanye West: VMA Awards 2009 - Imma Let You Finish*, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFSY4Mda\\_18&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFSY4Mda_18&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>5</sup> “Beck Responds to Kanye Grammy Diss: ‘I Thought Beyonce Was Going to Win,’” *Rolling Stone*. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/beck-responds-to-kanye-grammy-diss-i-thought-beyonce-was-going-to-win-20150209>.

is Beyoncé's story, and obviously our 'destiny' was to play a part in it. If that experience helped to shape her and make her into what she is now, then what more can we ask?"<sup>6</sup>

Though conventionally thought of as nothing more than supplementary or promotional material, music videos are an integral part of *BEYONCÉ*. In their book on music videos, Daine Railton and Paul Watson assume that videos serve little purpose beyond furthering the chart success of a song.<sup>7</sup> But the relationship between the music and the videos is different in *BEYONCÉ*. When audiences received the visual album, equal importance was given to the videos and the songs. Because the videos were released simultaneously with the music, the meaning of the songs is dependent on the videos. Few music videos have ever had this much interpretive weight. The visual aspects of the songs on *BEYONCÉ* allow even relatively standard pop song narratives to be about something else—something more complex than words alone can convey. When I consider the videos from this album, I am considering them as some of the most important pop media in recent memory. It is this idea of the videos complementing or complicating the songs that I will explore throughout my thesis.

As a white person, my engagement with the texts I analyze will be, unavoidably, shaded by my own lived whiteness. There is a long history of whites objectifying black women and when I write about Beyoncé I am writing in the shadow of this history. This history unavoidably impacts the discourse surrounding Beyoncé. For instance, scientists from Australia named a species of fly after Beyoncé because of "the unique dense golden hairs on the fly's abdomen." Press releases about the name choice all related the decision to the Destiny's Child song "Bootylicious" in what is a clear, and very disturbing, association between a black woman's body and an insect.<sup>8</sup> The racial conception of "whiteness" or, originally "Europeanness" centered on defining other races as bizarre or disgusting, and specifically emphasizing non-white bodies as different and unevolved. The well publicized case of Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus" is a particularly

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<sup>6</sup> Nate Jones, "Skeleton Crew: Meet the Band Who Beat a Young Beyoncé on Star Search," *PEOPLE.com*. <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20768720,00.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011). pg 2.

<sup>8</sup> "New Species of Fly Named in Honour of Performer Beyoncé," CSIRO, January 12, 2012, Accessed December 8, 2014, <http://www.csiro.au/Portals/Media/2012/New-species-fly-Beyonce.aspx>.

famous example. Baartman was brought to Europe to be shown as a specimen of blackness and was chosen “because of her unusually sized buttocks.” This fetishization encouraged a European notion of African women as grotesquely proportioned, a thought especially driven by the scientific establishment who created a large number of renderings overemphasizing her buttocks and labia.<sup>9</sup> Scientific discourse on black women’s bodies has been mired in racism for centuries, a historical influence that continues to be relevant to this day.

My focus will not, however, be on the discourse that surrounds Beyoncé. Racialized conversations about her body should not be left unconsidered, as they are incredibly important for anti-racist and feminist analysis. Though I will not be focusing on these issues, I will simply take it as a given that there are incredibly racist and sexist ideas at work in these conversations. Instead, my later chapters will examine Beyoncé’s creative output. In his oft-quoted maxim from *White*, Richard Dyer states the goal of his book: to make whiteness strange.<sup>10</sup> In my thesis I will mark the ways in which Beyoncé, one of the pre-eminent pop stars of our time, uses her music videos to relate to whiteness, and, ultimately, to distance herself from whiteness.

My thesis will focus on the ways that Beyoncé traverses the boundaries between black and white, using white signifiers to both appeal to a white pop audience, and simultaneously reaffirm her own not-whiteness for the large audiences of color who consume her music. In doing so she follows in a long line of other performers, going as far back as Hattie McDaniel, the Oscar-winning actress who played Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, who in 1915 performed in a vaudeville-style show in which she and her troupe donned whiteface in order to perform such tropes as “a British nobleman, a German immigrant, two unemployed drifters and a tango dancer.”<sup>11</sup>

In chapter one of my thesis I present the terms I will be working with throughout. I propose definitions of whiteness, whiteface, and performativity, as well as discuss the place of racial performance in pop music. I will also introduce Faedra Carpenter’s terms “nonconforming whiteface” and “optic whiteface.” I will argue for a renaming of

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<sup>9</sup> Brenda Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body : A Geography from Coon to Cool*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 150-1.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Sheri Parks, *Fierce Angels* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013) 113-4.

Carpenter's term, and I will propose the term "symbolic whiteface" which will recur in my later chapters. Additionally, in my first chapter I consider practices for performing whiteness, and whiteface. I argue that pop performances of race often reference raced stereotypes or tropes, and the inclusion of these tropes creates an association with whiteness.

In chapter two I will consider two music videos featuring the housewife image, and I will analyze how these videos construct that image, and then examine the impact of such performances of whiteness. I will give close readings of the video for "If U Seek Amy," by Britney Spears, and "Why Don't You Love Me?" by Beyoncé. Though these videos use the housewife image to create different narratives, they both present images of a hegemonic type of white femininity. I discuss tropes associated with the physical performances of black women and white women in music videos, and propose that by flipping those scripts it is possible for black women to embody whiteness. I argue that Beyoncé performs whiteness.

In chapter three I discuss several music videos from Beyoncé's most recent album *BEYONCÉ*. I show a shift in Beyoncé's artistic choices. I argue that *BEYONCÉ* shows a new way of engaging with race and racism. The visual album is much more critical than earlier work by Beyoncé, and I offer readings of the videos explaining some techniques she uses to critique whiteness.

My thesis presents an arc that I see in Beyoncé's career: from much more normative performances of whiteness, and, as Railton and Watson argue, blackness as well, to a new aesthetic, rooted in rap culture. The transformation in Beyoncé's career shows how malleable performance of race can be. This emphasizes the transience of race, and further stresses just how much of race is based, not on skin tone, but on performance and performativity.



# Chapter 1: The Multiplicity of Performances of Whiteness

A woman in a voluminous white dress runs across an expansive green field, the sun high in the sky. Her blonde hair is worn up, and the dress streams behind her. With just this image in mind, would you guess that the artist in question was a young Taylor Swift, country-music darling, or the pop artist Beyoncé? In fact, both women have run across green fields to their true loves in music videos—Taylor Swift did it in 2009, and Beyoncé in 2011. Both shots had the generic quality of a stock photo or a romantic film. Their white dresses, which connote virginity to a modern audience, and a pastoral setting which many associate with wealth, work together to create, truly, a vision in white, or perhaps, a vision of whiteness.

In this chapter I focus on performances of whiteness. In particular, I explore black practices of performing whiteness, and several techniques used to create images of whiteness. To help guide my later discussion of Beyoncé's performances of whiteness, I will take my cues from Faedra Carpenter's book, published in 2014, *Coloring Whiteness* which presents techniques used in a variety of artistic enterprises to disrupt the normalcy of whiteness. Using this book I argue for an expansion of our understanding of what black performances of whiteness can be. In particular I utilize Carpenter's idea of "nonconforming whiteface," and propose a renaming, and an expansion, of this term. I argue that many elements of whiteness can be referenced as images—*American Gothic*, *Leave it to Beaver*, Ronald Reagan, hippie, etc.—and these images, or tropes, can be performed by people who do not have access to the privileges of whiteness. Performing whiteness when you lack white privilege is, or can be, a radical act. I will discuss this idea more fully later when in conversation with Faedra Carpenter's *Coloring Whiteness*.

Many scholars have outlined the ways in which blackness and whiteness are constructed. They have articulated clearly the fact that blackness and whiteness, and

indeed racial constructions on a whole, are societally created and reinforced.<sup>12</sup> I will start from this assumption. I will attempt to discuss as well the ways that people perform other races, and the ways in which people perform “their own” race. My focus will be on what I call symbolic whiteface, and what Carpenter calls nonconforming whiteface, but will also explore “performative” whiteness.

## Defining Whiteness

When I discuss “whiteness” in my thesis I am using a culturally specific term. I am focusing not on some universal whiteness, whatever that may be, but rather on American Whiteness, the whiteness that we see in the United States. As many scholars agree, race is not biological. Instead it is a “sociohistorical concept” which, according to Omi and Winant, means race is “given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which [it is] embedded.”<sup>13</sup>

Writers who discuss critical whiteness studies often focus on certain aspects of whiteness: white privilege, white masculinity, white music, laws defining whiteness, the creation of a concept of whiteness, class and whiteness, gender and whiteness, it goes on and on. Few, if any, have tried to create an all-encompassing description of whiteness. Some say that whiteness is as simple as a color, or a lack of melanin, but American whiteness is more complex than that. My conception of whiteness envisions it as a web, composed of strings of performance, tropes, cultural touchstones, ways of speaking, of singing, of moving, and more. The web of whiteness is tied together, maintained by privilege, an integral part of the white experience, but not an inherent part of the images of whiteness I will discuss.

Whiteness bends and shifts, so that whatever it is, it is always presented in opposition to blackness. Many have covered this dichotomy, but understanding it is

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “Racial Formations,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States : An Integrated Study*, ed. Paula Rosenberg, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 15.

crucial to my work in this thesis.<sup>14</sup> According to white hegemonic values, blackness is dirty, and overtly sexual, while whiteness is pure, and restrained: blackness is in the body, whereas whiteness is of the mind. Some have considered black men to be more “authentic” than white men, having something more “raw” or “natural” about them.<sup>15</sup> That said, there is no definition of what blackness is, just as there is no definition of whiteness. For all that they have been presented as diametrically opposed, circling each other in combat for centuries, they are, essentially, united. Blackness and whiteness are deep in a sick, codependent relationship, and cannot exist alone.

A common trope amongst scholars of critical whiteness studies, is that whiteness is invisible. I assert instead that this is a way of describing the omnipresence of whiteness, but it is not an accurate way of doing so. Whiteness is invisible to white people, but it is hyper-visible to people who are not white. Maureen T. Redding writes, “Whiteness and heterosexuality seem invisible, transparent, to those who are white and/or heterosexual; they are simply norms. In contrast, whiteness makes itself hypervisible to those who are not white...”<sup>16</sup> White people often have a difficult time discerning what whiteness looks like when it is performed by whites. This concept seems to be something that mystifies us. When a black artist performs a specific white character or trope, however, whiteness is easier for whites to see. For instance, a black performer playing a white aristocrat might trigger an outcry of disappointment from black fans for over-valuing whiteness, and devaluing blackness. This same action, however, can be interpreted as a black woman embodying a role that has been denied to her by white cultural policing. Such a performance affirms that black women have access to women who are revered. White people will notice black artists playing “white” roles more than

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<sup>14</sup> This is addressed well in Richard Dyer’s book *White*, which discusses how white images have been historically constructed to bring out whiteness, and push aside blackness. Another example would be Shayne Lee’s book *Erotic Revolutionaries*, which addresses the division of black and white women in the introduction.

<sup>15</sup> Robin James, “‘Robo-Diva R&B’: Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20, no. 4 (December 1, 2008): 402–23.

<sup>16</sup> Maureen Redding, “Invisibility/Hypervisibility: The Paradox of Normative Whiteness,” in *Privilege*, ed. Michael Kimmel and Abby Ferber, Second (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 156.

they will black artists playing less specifically racialized roles, or “black” roles, because whiteness is sacred to white people, and whites often feel the need to decide who can and cannot play “white” roles. Ultimately, both interpretations are valid, and the same performances of whiteness can cut both ways.

## Embodying Whiteness

My thesis will explore techniques that artists, both white and black, use to present images of whiteness to the audience. Use of the body is often critical to these performances. I will turn here to Richard Dyer who describes the white body, and its connection to the “white spirit” in this way:

the white spirit could both master and transcend the white body, while the non-white soul was a prey to the promptings and fallibilities of the body. A **hard, lean body, a dieted or trained one, an upright, shoulders back, unrelaxed posture, tight rather than loose movement**, tidiness in domestic arrangement and eating manners, **privacy** in relation to bowels, abstinence or at any rate planning in relation to appetites, all of these are the **ways that the white body and its handling display the fact of the spirit within.**<sup>17</sup>

This understanding of the white spirit, which is rooted in white supremacy, understands the white *spirit* as the truly powerful force, and the white body as secondary. That is to say that by this understanding the body is not what makes a white person white, rather, it is superiority of spirit and mind. Embodying the white spirit through the imperfect white body means that white people must create certain techniques that will separate them out, from people who are not white. Creating a code of conduct, so to speak, for “white behavior” creates a template for whiteness. Solidifying the divide between the “truly white” spirit and the imperfectly white body allows the techniques that white people use to perform their whiteness to be overtaken by those who are not white. In particular the emphasis on the rigors that a body must go through to verify its whiteness, and the posturing that white people perform to justify their bodies as white enough are easy to see in performances by people of color. For example in the Supremes’ videos from the mid-60s, their dance moves are very similar to white girl groups from the era, like the Angels.

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<sup>17</sup> Dyer, 23-4.

The “dancing” in both groups’ videos consists primarily of snapping, and other stiff, slightly jerky, arm movement, or as Dyer described it, “tight, rather than loose movement” and general rigidity in posture.<sup>18</sup>

For white women, however, the rigidity and abstinence that Dyer writes of are made even more crucial. Dyer writes that the idea of purity is central to the formation of an image of white women, and when theorizing about what marks white performance as white, the notion of purity comes to the forefront again and again.<sup>19</sup> The purity of white women works well when we think about the things that one must do to perform the appropriate white body: moderation and privacy are both desperately important, and since white women have to work harder, at least in a historical view, to make their bodies submit to their minds, the performance of white womanhood takes to extremes things like the “dieted, trained” body or “privacy” or “abstinence.” It is also crucial that black women have historically been presented as sexually available, in contrast with the assumed sexual abstinence of white women. Indeed respectability politics amongst black women arose in part because of the violence that was inflicted upon them because of this presumed innate (sometimes called “animal”) sexuality. When considering a black woman’s performance of white womanhood then, this tension must always be in our minds: as long as white women have been pure, black women have been called dirty, to further purify white women.<sup>20</sup>

## Racial Performativity

A performative act is, in its most basic form, an utterance that enacts what is being said.<sup>21</sup> Performativity has been applied to gender, most famously by Judith Butler. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” Butler writes “gender is instituted

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<sup>18</sup> *The Supremes Baby Love*, 2006,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23UkIkwy5ZM&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23UkIkwy5ZM&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>19</sup> Dyer, 22.

<sup>20</sup> An excellent example of this is Railton and Watson’s reading of Kylie Minogue’s videos, in which they attribute things dark, natural, and animal to Beyoncé, while attributing things clean, unnatural, and pure to Minogue.

<sup>21</sup> Oliver Bates, “Performativity,” ed. Michael Ryan, *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011).

through the stylization of the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gesture, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”<sup>22</sup> I would like to draw focus to her notion of repetition, as the repetition of gesture and movements is one I engage with. Many excellent scholars have dedicated themselves to explaining how performativity functions with gender. Fewer people have devoted time to describing how performativity creates whiteness, or race, in the same ways. Could it not be that mundane “gesture, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding” *raced* self?

In the lives of black women, for example, the performative aspects of race and gender intersect to demonize the expression of black women’s sexualities. When Butler discusses the ways that women create women, she does not specify that white women create white women, and black women create black women, but other writers clarify the racial elements at work. There is, in particular, a great body of work that focuses around the issue of sexual repression, and what is called the “politics of silence” amongst black women. Shayne Lee concisely explains the issue saying that “black women learn to think conservatively about sexuality and scrupulously supervise their representation to avoid participating in the historical legacy of sexual stereotyping and exploitation.”<sup>23</sup> Evelyn Hammonds describes the beginning of this issue as a reaction against “the construction of the Black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of Black women as the unvoiced, unseen everything that is not white.”<sup>24</sup> This reactive repression of sexuality can be seen regularly in reactions to Beyoncé’s career, for example when Wendy Williams asked her talk show audience to clap if they thought it was time for Beyoncé to close her legs and put on some clothes.<sup>25</sup> In this example, the policing of sexuality is a means of enforcing and creating both race and gender.

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*: Vol 40. No. 4. 519.

<sup>23</sup> Shayne Lee, *Erotic Revolutionaries Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2010. Viii.

<sup>24</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (w)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences* 6, no. 2 (1994). 132.

<sup>25</sup> *Wendy Williams Today's HOT TOPICS - Monday 1/27/14*, 2014.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRsjCWOxCyI&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRsjCWOxCyI&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

An example of racial performativity in pop music can be seen in '60s era Motown. Cynthia Cyrus writes in "Selling an image: girl groups of the 1960s" that Motown performers went to a Motown-run "charm school" if they were signed to the label. She writes that "the singers learned etiquette and hygiene and practiced even the simplest and most basics of tasks. They *re-learned* how to walk, talk, sit, rise. They studied proper table manners. They had their clothes and hair styled by the staff experts. They were even taught how to fill out tax returns."<sup>26</sup> All this to teach them the skills they needed to appeal to the record buyers, out of which "seven of ten [were] white."<sup>27</sup> While this may have started as a performance of whiteness, we can see the experience as one that changes the bodies of the performers. In one interview Martha Reeves, a former singer for Motown, says about her lessons: "[her teacher] gave us handsome tips *that I use even today*."<sup>28</sup> Martha Reeves was taught to appeal to white audiences, and it permanently altered her.

The performativity of whiteness is a kind of social control. It is a set of values, the voice of white supremacy within ones' head. In a white person, it declares what sorts of actions are "appropriate," and what sorts of actions aren't things that "nice people" do. Performative whiteness often manifests in conjunction with class anxiety and heteronormativity, as a way of upholding the values that white people see as extraneous to race. White people struggle to see sexuality, gender, and class, as interdependent on race, and yet, for white people, our performances of those things are contingent upon our whiteness. Whiteness is what influences conceptions of things as "quality" or "classy." Performative whiteness is what we associate with tasteful displays of wealth: to show wealth with tasteful luxury rather than "gaudier" means, is a way of maintaining the boundaries of acceptable wealth, and ensuring that those who are wealthy meet the white standards for how the wealthy should behave. The performative aspect of whiteness means reinforcing whiteness at every turn, without ever considering it. Whiteness influences our choices in media as well. Largely, however, racial performativity is so thoroughly intermingled with other aspects of our lives that it is muddled and confusing.

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<sup>26</sup> Cyrus, 187.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Performative whiteness is embodied. It is a part of the experience of being an “actual white person”—although no one knows what that is—in America. It is in the way I dress myself, and how I speak; it is in the way I relate to others, and how I conceive of myself. Whiteness is all around me, and because of that, it is a real challenge to pick things out and say “this is whiteness acting” or this is what a performance of whiteness looks like, but it is necessary. If we convince ourselves that whiteness is static, and unchanging, then it cannot improve itself. If we believe that whiteness is simply a matter of skin tone, and nothing more, how can we alter the world in which we live? It is necessary to try to understand whiteness as something more than just skin, because it is. Performative whiteness goes beyond skin color, which is superficial, and into the systematic denigration of everyone who is not white, and is reinforced in many tiny ways. Performative whiteness, which upholds the systems of white supremacy with which we live, can be performed by anyone, and it is never transgressive.

## Performing in Whiteface

In fall of 2014 Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter published her book *Coloring Whiteness*, which focuses on the ways in which African-American art from 1964-2008 present whiteness and explores “dramaturgical strategies [used] to make whiteness ‘strange.’”<sup>29</sup> The book examines a variety of performances of whiteness, and expounds upon how they “resist the presentation of whiteness as normative and, [...] expose the fallacies associated with racial designations.”<sup>30</sup> Her book outlines several styles of these performances, and she gives a name to each, based on the notion of whiteface, which grounds the book.

Whiteface has a long history in African-American performance. In the most basic sense, is understood as white face paint on someone who is not white. Marvin McAllister defines whiteface thusly, in his book *Whiting Up*:

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<sup>29</sup> Faedra Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2014) 3.

<sup>30</sup> Carpenter, 3.



I define whiteface as extra-theatrical, social performance in which people of African descent appropriate white-identified gestures, vocabulary, dialects, dress or social entitlements. Attuned to class as much as race, whiteface minstrels often satirize, parody, and interrogate privileged or authoritative representations of whiteness.<sup>31</sup>

McAllister writes that whiteface is *often* parody, but that it is always “social performance,” or performance with a social message or agenda. McAllister and Carpenter both include as central to their understanding of whiteface performance an aspect of critique, the texts that Carpenter explore are all fairly explicitly critiquing whiteness. While I will explore in my third chapter some ways in which Beyoncé does critique whiteness, my second chapter will focus on a less clear-cut example.

Throughout my first chapter, and the remainder of my thesis, I will be engaging with two of the terms that Carpenter puts forward in *Coloring Whiteness*: optic whiteface, and nonconforming whiteface. *Coloring Whiteness* provides a crucial grounding for my thesis, but because her analysis focuses primarily on works that are fundamentally critical of whiteness, and I will expand some of her ideas to include whiteface performances that are less explicitly critical. The first term of Carpenter’s that I will discuss is “optic whiteface.” Carpenter describes optic whiteface as “expressed by the absence of color.”<sup>32</sup> This type of whiteface draws attention to the impossibility of racial purity by presenting audiences with a truly pure whiteness that is unattainable in humans. Carpenter calls this optic whiteface to draw a comparison between Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in which a paint called optic white is created using “ten drops of dead black.”<sup>33</sup>

In the chapter where Carpenter primarily discusses optic whiteface she draws comparisons to its masklike qualities, heightening the idea of this bright white as artificial. Carpenter describes use of optic whiteface in which “the bright base makeup... was drawn *within* the outline of each actor’s face, as if portraying an ill-fitting mask.”<sup>34</sup> This style of whiteface, “white concealing black is also anxiety producing” bringing to

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<sup>31</sup> McAllister, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Carpenter, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Carpenter, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Carpenter, 48.

mind unacknowledged realities; that whiteness of skin might not be enough, that whites might not be “truly” white.<sup>35</sup>

The term I devote the most time to in my thesis is nonconforming whiteface. The concept that Carpenter describes in nonconforming whiteface is more commonly seen in pop performance than optic whiteface, which is fairly uncommon. Carpenter writes of her term “nonconforming whiteface:”

“Recognizing that whiteface is already perceived as a “nontraditional” form of racialized performance, nonconforming whiteface violates expectations even further by employing tangible items *beyond* an actor’s body in order to further signify whiteness. Void of face paint, makeup, of facial masking altogether, *nonconforming whiteface* refers to the intimation of a character’s corporeal whiteness solely through the use of theatrical props, symbolic attire, or similar material accouterments associated with the actor’s body.”<sup>36</sup>

What Carpenter describes is a kind of “whiteface” that is created by signs that are not generated by the alteration of the body itself, but rather by adornment of the body, or its location in space, or the use of props surrounding it. The whiteface that she describes is not true whiteface as McAllister presents it. Nevertheless, one might argue that costumes and props are always a central part of whiteface performance. After all, when members of Hattie McDaniel’s vaudeville troupe played in whiteface, their roles were recorded. They were not simply playing white people; they were playing white types, or white tropes. There was a member who was playing a British lord. How did they show this? Was it with costume choices? Presumably the performer who was playing the lord did more than just paint his face white and wear his street clothes, he might have even worn something other than his nicest clothes. He could have worn a sash, or medals, or carried a cane. While the details of the performance are not recorded, their roles as tropes were, and it takes more than white face paint to be read as a character. The costumes and props of whiteness that create “nonconforming whiteface” are an integral part of standard whiteface performance, and it is merely their isolation that make them noteworthy. The

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<sup>35</sup> Carpenter, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Carpenter, 24.

use of props and costumes to demarcate whiteness show how we can envision whiteness outside of white bodies, or how we understand an absent whiteness in order to make sense of a situation. In this way, “Nonconforming whiteface,” that is, the props and costumes without the white face paint, underscores the ways in which whiteness is “material accouterments” as much as, or more than skin color.

Carpenter’s reasons for choosing the term “nonconforming” to describe this type of whiteface are clear. Generally, when we think of whiteface, we think of it as the name would describe it, with white face paint, or powder. “Nonconforming whiteface” simply does not conform to that standard. In that respect, the term is wholly accurate. If we take nonconforming in the sense of, say, “gender non-conforming” it gains the sense of being slightly deviant. Whiteface is already a “deviant” act, something that is not a part of the artistic mainstream, and so it is misleading to call one particular type of it nonconforming, because it does not meet the usual standards for whiteface performance. Nonconforming has the connotation is being on the outside, being provocative. While it is not the same as “nonconformist,” the association of one rubs off on the other. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the term “nonconforming” back to those who were at odds with the Church of England, giving the idea of being “nonconforming” a historical precedent for danger, or outsider status.<sup>37</sup> While there is not a clear definition of the word “nonconforming,” the Oxford English Dictionary defines “conform” as “having the same form or character; similar, like.”<sup>38</sup> All of this to say, that “nonconforming whiteface” is not the best term for what Carpenter describes so well. What she describes is whiteface that is created outside the body, an “intimation of whiteness” that is constructed by playing with the audience’s cultural assumptions about what “white” really is. This idea of whiteface that she describes is object-based, and is made with things like costume pieces, wigs, or other things that do not require an alteration of skin color. While more traditional whiteface paints the skin white to emphasize the falseness of “white” skin

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<sup>37</sup> "nonconforming, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 7 December 2014.

<sup>38</sup> "conform, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 7 December 2014.

equaling whiteness, this prop and costume-based whiteness focuses on the isolated images of whiteness, and places them adjacent to not-white bodies.

I want to repurpose Carpenter's definition to draw the focus towards the means of its production, and away from the "nonconforming" aspect of it—I want to focus on what it *is* rather than what it is *not*. Taking Carpenter's apt description and categorization of nonconforming whiteness as a productive starting point—it is different to reference white images, and to incorporate and appropriate white icons. The term that I propose instead is "symbolic whiteface." I chose the term symbolic whiteface to draw attention to what I think is the most significant part of Carpenter's original definition: the "intimation of a character's corporeal whiteness solely through the use of theatrical props, symbolic attire, or similar material accouterments associated with the actor's body."<sup>39</sup> The many ways this sort of symbolic whiteface can be performed vary drastically. Some of these performances can be clearly transgressive, some leave their use of symbolic whiteface up to interpretation, and some are made in tacit support of white aesthetic values.

I envision symbolic whiteface as a costume. It is a deliberate piece of performance that acknowledges the not-whiteness of the performer, while also engaging with a sort of hegemonic whiteness. While this means of performance *can* be nonconforming in a deviant sense, it can also be a means of relating to wider audiences, or associating your performance with something that is "classically beautiful" or "good." Images of put-on whiteness can be a double-edged sword. For a black artist to associate too much with "white" art can lead to cries of "race traitor" or "New Black." If, however, your audience feels as though they are in on a joke, it becomes something fun. It can be a tongue-in-cheek way of saying "this is what I am not" even as you perform it. I chose to rename this technique because this type of whiteface can be the height of conformity: reaffirming the quality and importance of the white artistic and cultural canon.

Whiteness, in addition to being a privileged state of being, is presented as the dominant cultural norm. It is challenging, if not impossible, to create art in America that is presented as a part of the larger artistic community, or the discourse of high art, without seeming to over-value the whiteness that comes with "high art." To a very great

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<sup>39</sup> Carpenter, 24.

extent, to engage with or appropriate “classic” or historical imagery in the United States, means engaging in what Carpenter might call “nonconforming whiteface.” Black artists do not only appropriate whiteness, however; Beyoncé, and many others, have appropriated blackness as well.

E. Patrick Johnson’s book *Appropriating Blackness* centers on the idea that “‘blackness’ does not belong to one individual or group. Rather individuals or groups *appropriate* the complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups.”<sup>40</sup> Some of Beyoncé’s recent performances, like “No Angel,” “Flawless Remix,” and “7/11” show that Beyoncé is trying to draw connections between herself and black artists. Instead of, as Johnson says, using blackness to exclude others, Beyoncé appropriates blackness to redefine herself. To say that Beyoncé is “appropriating blackness” however, sounds like an accusation. It sounds as though she is just being opportunistic—and perhaps she is. It is important to remember, however, that pop artists almost never market themselves to black audiences. Even black pop artists typically assume that black audiences will still consume their music, regardless of how much “whiteness” they perform. The career of a black pop star who adopts a decidedly black aesthetic, especially one that is often associated with “harder” artists, is worth exploring.

The relationship pop performers have with whiteness is far more complex than many think. It is easy to treat pop simply, as Adorno does, in assuming it is just a lot of standardized sounds. Doing that ignores the vast creative output that pop artists are responsible for, as well as the influence they have on younger artists.<sup>41</sup> If pop were more utopian, or if pop artists critically engaged more often with the world around them, we would be more willing to see their interaction with larger conversations. As it is, we often interpret pop music as either preachy or pointless. There is no room for critical engagement with much of anything in our conception of pop. Part of the aim of my thesis is to explore the ways in which we can open up routes of inquiry in order to think

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<sup>40</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003. 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> “On Popular Music” by Theodore Adorno, In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by John Storey, 2nd ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. 200.

critically about pop music. In my later chapters I will explore the ways that I see Beyoncé performing race. I will focus on her performances of whiteness, but I will also explore her political uses of blackness as well. Doubtless, some of my interpretations will be far off from the creator's intent. Despite this, it is important to treat pop as a site worthy of inquiry, if for no other reason than to show it can be done, and to show that there is more to pop than just fluff. If we treat pop as the meaningful and influential force that it is, we may see more pop that tries to engage critically with issues of race and gender.

Ultimately, however, we are responsible for creating methods of reading and understanding pop that allow for that engagement.

## Chapter 2: Desperate Housewives—Symbolic Whiteface

“I got beauty, I got class, I got style and I got ass,” Beyoncé sings, mopping her kitchen casually. In the next shot, she is furiously scrubbing dishes, then lying face down on the couch, thrusting her hips into the air. Beyoncé, in short, is everything, has everything, and can do everything. She is perfect. So “why,” she sings, “Why don’t you love me?”

In this video, Beyoncé performs the role of the housewife: the desperation, the boredom, the labor. The housewife is a classic white trope. She is the quintessential mother, represented in classics like *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *I Love Lucy*, and *Leave it to Beaver*. The housewife has been portrayed glowingly, teasingly, and even pejoratively; she has been shown as blessed and depressed, and but most consistently she has been shown, almost exclusively, as white. The housewife is linked in the modern imagination with the pin-up, a sexy daydream who is also conceived of as white. The housewife might be known for popping valium, sure, but she is still an indicator of what many think of as America’s golden years, the time when “family” truly thrived. This thriving, of course, was happening at the same time when Emmett Till, and others like him, were being murdered for supposedly threatening white women. This contrast is inescapable in 1950s iconography. We think of soda shops, of *Grease*, of *Bye Bye Birdie*, but these cultural icons hardly cover the grim reality of life in the ’50s for black Americans.

Is it inherently political for a black woman to perform a trope associated with white womanhood? All too often we assume that these performances, when they occur in pop genres, are apolitical, or based solely in a desire to appeal to white audiences. What if we looked closer at the video, and really considered the question Beyoncé is asking of her audience? As she sings in “Why Don’t You Love Me?” she has “beauty, style, class,” values especially associated with whiteness, and she has “ass,” which has been made

ubiquitous with black women's sexuality for centuries (Fig. 2). Beyoncé embodies and performs a tension that drives my thesis. How can someone embody whiteness?

I will argue that there are tropes associated with whiteness that can be seen in performance, and that black artists, as well as white artists, can perform these types of whiteness, in the form of symbolic whiteface. In this chapter I aim to show that there are certain conventions of performance that are associated with black and white music videos, and further I aim to challenge the notion that performances of blackness and whiteness are linked, specifically, to the performer's skin. I will be focusing, in particular, on how these tropes manifest themselves in performances by Britney Spears and Beyoncé. In some cases, the assumed nature of whiteness makes it particularly challenging to point to actions that stem from whiteness, however, because all too often the base assumption is that skin color is the only signifier needed. Since it is typical to assume that whiteness is located in the skin alone, it may seem like the best way to decide if a dancer is performing or embodying whiteness would be to look at their skin. I aim to challenge this idea by exploring some of the performance tropes that certain scholars have argued mark white women's music video performances.

Diane Railton and Paul Watson's 2011 book *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* has a chapter titled "Music Video in Black and White: Race and Femininity." This chapter presents videos by two artists. Beyoncé, a black performer and Kylie Minogue, a white one. The videos that Railton and Watson compare are "Baby Boy," by Beyoncé, and "Can't Get You Out of My Head" by Kylie Minogue. The videos are thematically similar, and were made within a few years of each other. Both videos focus on an obsessive love affair, but present the women very differently. Dyer states that, "abstinence [...] in relation to appetites" is a marker of embodied whiteness. Abstinence has been especially important in the construction of acceptable white femininity. The abstinence of white women, contrasted with the presumed availability of black women, is something that Diane Railton and Paul Watson describe in their book. In their chapter exploring performances of race and femininity, Railton and Watson write



about the “fleshy” nature of black women’s dance performance, and compare it to the sterile, or unmoveable flesh of white women’s dance.<sup>42</sup>

Railton and Watson use Beyoncé as an example of the “ideal type” of black dance as seen in music videos. I use their chapter focusing on blackness and whiteness in music videos to show that Beyoncé can also be read as performing an ideal type of white femininity in some of her music videos. In particular, Beyoncé’s video for “Why Don’t You Love Me?” is a demonstration of some techniques that black artists can use to perform the tropes of white womanhood. Further, I demonstrate that this video is not an isolated occurrence in Beyoncé’s oeuvre and that these performances of whiteness should not be cast out as apolitical or as necessarily indicative of an artist caving to the pressures of white hegemony, but rather that these performances show a few ways that black artists like Beyoncé can create, and critique, images of whiteness using dance and costume. To help to better understand the performances of whiteness that are at work in “Why Don’t You Love Me?” I will first consider the music video for Britney Spears’ song “If U Seek Amy,” as it is a video that is explicitly about the performance of acceptable femininity, and equally about performances of whiteness and class.<sup>43</sup> “If U Seek Amy” uses the trope of the housewife as well, and I will explore the limitations performances of black womanhood and white womanhood create.

Railton and Watson begin “Music Video in Black and White” with a historical overview of the over-sexualization of black women’s bodies. In this chapter, they focus on black women’s buttocks. There is a long history of racist rhetoric surrounding black women’s bodies. Indeed, as I mentioned in my first chapter, black women’s bodies have been so excessively described, measured, and examined, that we have created a vast difference between the bodies and the sexualities of black and white women.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Railton and Watson argue that black women are strongly associated with wildness, while white women are often pictured in pristine environments.<sup>45</sup> The pristine,

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<sup>42</sup> Railton and Watson, “The many outfits that Knowles wears in the video reveal her flesh, or more precisely, the very *fleshiness* of her flesh.” 98

<sup>43</sup> Although one might argue that any performance of acceptable femininity is a performance of whiteness in some ways.

<sup>44</sup> Railton and Watson, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Railton and Watson, 98 and 100.

structured environments that surround white women continue to emphasize these supposed distinctions between black and white women: reinforcing the structures and rigors of whiteness, while simultaneously casting blackness as “animalistic.”

Using Kylie Minogue as the ideal type of white female music video performer, Railton and Watson describe her movement as “mechanized and controlled, [and] hyperstylized by clothing and costume.”<sup>46</sup> They also point out that the video is “complexly choreographed,” but that “physical performance [is] often reduced to minimalistic, simple body movements.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed to say that the video is complexly choreographed seems misleading: the movements themselves are not complex. The authors bring up the unfleshy nature of Minogue’s performance, and point out that “while [her] body does move, it is notable that her flesh does not.”<sup>48</sup> Put more simply, her flesh is largely taut, and not able to move freely. Railton and Watson also argue that this is made possible, and in fact accentuated by the costuming choices that were made within the video.<sup>49</sup> They say of Kylie Minogue, “the fabric falls open to reveal that the flesh of her breasts, stomach and thighs remains firm, taut and static: the sight of her flesh set against the fluidity of the dress merely confirms the flesh’s rigidity.”<sup>50</sup> This attention to costume also emphasizes the fact that embodied whiteness is not just about posture, but also the way clothing can draw attention to, or distract from, the things that make a performer “white” or “less white.” Additionally, while Minogue, like Beyoncé, performs dance moves that require pelvic thrusting and rotation, when she does these moves, the camera is usually zoomed out, making the focus not Minogue herself, but the entire group of dancers. Ultimately, the environment, costuming and dancing all align to create the image that “Minogue’s [sexual] availability is always provisional, restricted, and

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<sup>46</sup> Railton and Watson 100.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Part of my problem with this chapter is that they refer to this video as complexly choreographed while they refer to Knowles’s dancing as “uncontrolled” which I think reveals a really white/Eurocentric view of what dancing should be, which gives me hesitations about other parts of their writing.

<sup>48</sup> Railton and Watson 101.

<sup>49</sup> Railton and Watson 101-2.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

contingent,” and supports Dyer’s claim that central to the performance of whiteness are the rigors of the body, and the resistance of appetites.<sup>51</sup>

Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes the “European academic aesthetic” of dance in her article “Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance,” saying that “the ideal is [to] initiate movement from one locus: the noble, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis.”<sup>52</sup> Movement originating in the torso, rather than the hips, can be seen in much of Minogue’s video. In fact, while she does move lower parts of her body, they are always isolated from her, and shown in quick flashes. If Minogue is moving her hips, the audience only sees her hips. Her face is often not in the shot, or if it is, the camera is zoomed out far enough that we can see all of the backup dancers as well. Minogue’s buttocks may be on the screen, but it is there for half a second, no more. Even if her flesh does move there is no opportunity to see it, because the camera does not linger on the lower half of her body. On the other hand, in “Baby Boy,” the Beyoncé video that the authors consider, the camera lingers and slowly pans over the lower half of her body repeatedly.

Railton and Watson create a dichotomy between black performance and white performance. They attach whiteness and blackness to white and black bodies in a way that seems to mark racial performance as somehow essential to bodies. In my thesis, I challenge that. I argue that performance is far more malleable than these authors give it credit for. Let us briefly consider “Sweet Dreams” another Beyoncé music video from several years after the two that Railton and Watson analyzed (Fig. 1). This video bears numerous marked similarities to the Kylie Minogue video that the authors discuss. Beyoncé wears a robotic looking armature and her movements are short and meticulously controlled, similar to the movement style in the Minogue video. Beyoncé is presented in the same sort of artificial white space. Indeed, while the video opens in a “natural setting,” a desert, it quickly becomes unnatural, with Beyoncé eventually shattering the boundaries of the space, forcing the audience to reconsider the “naturalness” of the original setting. Additionally, in this video the clothes she wears often cover her body like a metallic, artificial shell. Nothing about this video portrays Beyoncé as at all

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<sup>51</sup> Railton and Watson, 100.

<sup>52</sup> Gottschild, 333.

“natural,” and its techniques for this presentation are remarkably similar to the Kylie Minogue video. The videos do not look the same, but they do use many of the same practices: such as costume choices, unnatural setting, and positioning and treatment of the body. Railton and Watson make a compelling argument in describing Minogue’s video as an “ideal type” of white women’s music video performance. If we consider the methods Minogue uses to create her image of white female sex appeal as standard, then what is the impact when Beyoncé performs them? What is the difference?

Throughout the remainder of the chapter I will, taking Railton and Watson’s chapter as a model, consider two videos featuring housewives. First I will examine Britney Spears’ video for her song “If U Seek Amy” which was released in 2008. I chose to include a video by a white performer to invite consideration and critique not just of black women’s performances of symbolic whiteface, but also of white women’s. My second video is “Why Don’t You Love Me?” a song by Beyoncé that was released in 2010. In comparing the two videos I hope to clarify the techniques that Beyoncé uses to perform whiteness, by also pointing out those techniques, when they occur, in Britney Spears’ video.

## **“If U Seek Amy,” or the unbearable whiteness of Britney**

The joke of “If U Seek Amy” is that it sounds like Britney Spears, once America’s sweetheart, is spelling out F-U-C-K me.<sup>53</sup> The music video for the song is based around that joke. The video plays with Britney Spears’ star persona in a way that it is light and humorous, while also dramatizing in a straightforward and remarkably explicit way a performance of the “good girl” trope. Most importantly for the purposes of my thesis, “If U Seek Amy” uses the trope of the housewife to create an image of “pure” whiteness that is set up as at odds with an “other” Britney (Fig. 2). Throughout the video the tension between pure and impure is toyed with. Just as symbolic whiteface

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<sup>53</sup> *Britney Spears - If U Seek Amy*, 2009, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aEnnH6t8Ts&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aEnnH6t8Ts&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

complicates the boundaries between black and white, Spears' performance in the video challenges the notion that whiteness is always pure. The overall story of the video is that of a tension between the Interior Britney, or "bad" Britney, and Exterior Britney, or "good" Britney, which I am labeling this way in part because one Britney must stay within the confines of the home, and the other is created for the voyeuristic pleasure of those outside Britney's area of comfort. The implication of the video is that one is real, the Interior Britney, and the other—the Britney presented to the world, the pure white Britney, is false.

The video is framed by a TV announcer over-enunciating the title of the song, while, a banner below her reads "BRITNEY SPEARS SONG LYRICS SPELL OUT OBSCENITY IN DISGUISE." The song begins with evidence of a raucous party, that is still underway: underwear littering the floor, couples grinding in the hallway, and women pulling on stockings in the bathroom. Throughout the video we see the interior Britney, wearing a black bondage-style outfit, dancing, and taking part in the party. A little less than halfway through the video we see her changing: the light is different, and she is putting on lighter colored clothes. Eventually, she goes downstairs, through the party, which is still in progress, and into her dining room, where she gracefully and picks up a pie from the dining room table. She goes outside with the pie and joins a group of white people who are presumably her husband and children, who all walk towards a white picket fence, where paparazzi are swarming. Britney presents the pie, and herself, to the paparazzi, and the video comes to a close with the same TV announcer saying, "it doesn't make any sense, does it?"

Throughout Interior Britney's time on screen, we still see remnants of her exterior or "good" self. The house is filled with couches and ottomans with matching upholstery, rooms with framed paintings, and all of the other trappings of a comfortable, wealthy, white-looking home. The interior of the house is "tasteful," and at odds with the parties inside the house who are anything but "tasteful." By filling the house with reminders of Britney's exterior self it is less of a shock when she appears. The décor also serves the purpose of reminding the viewer of Britney's "real" status, as a wealthy white woman. A question is raised by the surroundings: is the Interior Britney a private self, known only to her friends, or is she a personal fantasy? If she is a fantasy, it is noteworthy that the

whiteness of her surroundings is so ingrained in her that even in her fantasy of orgiastic release, she is still ensconced in a safe, proper, affluent “white-looking” home. Britney Spears, however, is not the “ideal type” of the white woman, at least not below the surface. But an important question is raised: if Spears’ interior self is a fantasy, and her exterior self is the one that she performs daily, her abstinence and privacy are truly remarkable. Part of what makes Britney Spears so fascinating as a cultural figure is her ability to toe the line so finely between acceptable and unacceptable, and this is a large part of the cultural fascination with Spears at this point in her life and career.

The dancing in the video further supports the image of Britney Spears as a white woman. The dancing is very angular, relying on broad movements that often originate from the chest or arms, which as Gottschild mentioned is typical of the white dancing body. Mostly, Spears does the same movements as the backup dancers, and the moves are largely coordinated with the lyrics to the song. For instance, when she says, “Say what you want about me,” Spears holds her hands in front of her mouth, and moves her arms up and down. This style of dancing, a sort of gestural style, movements intimating the meanings of the words, is common throughout pop music, but was seen, famously, in songs like “Stop! In the Name of Love,” or in early videos of the Temptations performing live, and of course many, many others.<sup>54</sup> While contemporary music videos have much more animated dancing, and are often more sexualized than performance videos from the ’60s or ’70s, some tropes remain relatively unchanged. It is noteworthy that even when we are presented with the Interior Britney, who is more sexual, more deviant, and darker than the Exterior Britney, she still performs in the tradition of many pop stars who came before her.

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<sup>54</sup> Indeed, we can most likely attribute dancing in pop music videos and live performance to the remarkable influence that black men had on pop. Many of Motown’s female acts were not accomplished dancers, but the Temptations and the Jackson 5 both heavily featured well choreographed and active dancing in their live performance, at a time when the Supremes and other black female acts were mimicking the still performances of white women, and mostly just moving their arms, or occasionally putting in a side step. While in contemporary culture dancing is seen as the domain of the female pop star, the engaging and energetic dancing that we now expect from women originated in black men’s group performances of the ’60s and early ’70s.

Spears' creation of a "bad girl" image is done mostly through costume and association, as well as the audience's understanding of the words of the song. We know that the interior Britney is sexy and dangerous because she sings about being at the club, and she wears tight black clothing that shows a lot of skin. She is attending a raucous party, so the audience understands that this Britney is the type of person who would attend that party. It is necessary to consider how the Interior Britney is created so that we can understand that the Exterior Britney created in much the same way, and later apply the understanding of that construction to Beyoncé's own construction of whiteness. I want to discuss two methods in particular that Spears uses to create her exterior self in this video: setting and behavior tropes.

The atmosphere of whiteness is established quickly in the video, largely through the use of set dressing (Fig. 3). For instance, in the dining room there is a dark wood table in the middle of the room, with matching chairs. There is a pie on the table, in a white pie pan. Above the table is a chandelier. There is a mantelpiece with a framed painting in the center. On either side are two white candles in white candleholders, which have never been lit. The presence of decorative chandeliers and candles reinforces the tasteful affluence of the home. The dining room is pristine, in contrast to the upstairs parts of the house: the upstairs part of the house is clearly where the party is happening, and when Spears leaves the house at the end of the video she leaves the front door open, making the lower part of the house visible to this outside, and clearly a part of her exterior self. Once Spears goes outside there is a continuation of the same sort of imagery. On one side of the door is a sign in a homey style that says "WELCOME" with a heart above it. On the other side of the door is a stone with "Bless this home" engraved in it. These images create an environment of whiteness that goes just beyond tasteful, but not far enough to be kitsch.

The techniques used to present Spears in the video also play a part in her image of whiteness. While the setting makes believable Britney's quick change between interior and exterior, bad and good, her behavior, and the way that she is filmed, makes it real. When Britney is performing her exterior self she is aloof from the dancers: they dance behind her and she moves through them, without participating. Interior Britney was chopped up by the camera, there were close ups on her breasts, her stomach and her

thighs. A slow shot of her buttocks serves no purpose other than the erotic, and while interior Britney is fully clothed, her clothes fit like a second skin. When Exterior Britney is divided on the screen the focus is not on her body but on her getting dressed. The screen is filled with, at certain times: her side, as she pulls on her shirt, her back as she zips up a white dress, and her chest, as she ties a sweater over her shoulders. Exterior Britney adds clothing, rather than taking away. While shots may begin as images of her skin, by the time the camera cuts away the flesh is no longer there, it is covered by clothing. The camera's focus is completely different than what it was when Interior Britney was on the screen. The clothes that she dons to perform the Exterior Britney are much less form-fitting, so the shots of her putting on clothes, while they do show glimpses of her skin, serve to cover, rather than reveal.

These methods create a certain distance from the more physical and bodily focus of the earlier part of the video, and allow the Exterior Britney to divorce herself from her body, whereas the Interior Britney was very bodily-focused. The separation of the spirit or mind and the body is one of the classic themes of whiteness, and so watching Britney create a "pure" self in part by separating herself from her body and desires clearly marks the Exterior Britney as more successfully white than the Interior Britney. This is not to say that the Interior Britney is necessarily representative of "black sexuality," but rather to paraphrase Dyer, that the Exterior Britney's "white spirit" is dominant over her fallible white body, whereas the Interior Britney is more governed by her body. Britney is made appropriate through association as well. When we see the downstairs of the house (and even to a certain extent the upstairs) we can understand it as a classed environment. Her picking up the pie and taking it to the paparazzi creates an image of her as a stay-at-home mom. The children and man that she is shown with help to solidify that image (Fig. 3). They are white, wealthy and "average" and so she must be also. The image of suburban calm that they present is so unified that the viewer can almost understand the TV anchor's confusion about the meaning of the song.

Ultimately, Spears' whiteness is reliant on her ultimate dominance over her own fantasies, although her white skin does certainly aid the communication of her whiteness. Spears' whiteness however allows for dirtiness and chaos, a confusion of the acceptable roles that is created in part by association. While her white skin is a part of the



association that the audience makes, the things that surround her, and the ways in which she treats her body, are also a part of that whiteness.

While, at the time “Why Don’t You Love Me?” was released Beyoncé had never painted her face white for a performance, in this video she performs in nontraditional whiteface, as I described in chapter one. In the remainder of this chapter I will consider how Beyoncé uses techniques similar to the ones I demonstrated that Britney Spears employed to perform her own mode of symbolic whiteface in the music video for “Why Don’t You Love Me?”

## **“Why Don’t You Love Me?”**

Beyoncé’s video for the song “Why Don’t You Love Me?” was released in 2010.<sup>55</sup> The video begins with a voice in the style of a TV show introduction, or a ’50s instructional film. The man’s voice oozes whiteness: it is self-confident, upbeat, and declaratory. Beyoncé is introduced to the audience as a new character “B. B. Homemaker” in what is presented as a TV show based on the song (Fig. 4). Throughout the song we see Beyoncé in a large assortment of costumes, each working within the framework of “updated” ’50s housewife. The song focuses on the tension between Beyoncé’s incredible perfection and the fact that she has still been rejected. Throughout the song she lists her many good qualities, and her ongoing sadness and frustration that the person in question stubbornly refuses to love her.

The video consists of Beyoncé performing a series of tropes or images that combine to form B. B. Homemaker. These images draw from a few different sources, although all of them are presented in a way that makes them more “contemporary” and more in line with Beyoncé’s image. She performs roles like Rosie the Riveter, Bettie Page, the valium-hooked housewife, the ingénue, and the French maid, just to name a few. I will consider the symbolic whiteface that Beyoncé creates by using these tropes, and I will further consider the movement of her body, and the way that her body is shown

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<sup>55</sup> *Beyoncé - Why Don’t You Love Me*, 2010, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QczgvUDskk0&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QczgvUDskk0&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

on camera, and the ways that the video emphasizes (or undermines) the “trained” aspect of the ideal white body.

The referential whiteness that Beyoncé performs in the video is a terrific example of symbolic whiteface. She creates this whiteface using the setting, much the same way that Spears does in “If U Seek Amy,” as well as referencing many images of whiteness that we commonly think of when we imagine housewives. While Spears also performed the housewife, hers was the desexualized antithesis to the interior Britney; in Beyoncé’s video, B.B. Homemaker, while she is many things, is still only one character, rather than two, like Spears. Spears had an interior fantasy self, and an exterior “real” self; in “Why Don’t You Love Me?” the various costume changes work together to create an image of one multifaceted and talented housewife: in part because all of the costume pieces, while different, are stylistically similar, and also because the camera treats B.B. Homemaker in the same way throughout the video. The fact that the video introduces her as a single character also contributes to this. The actions that she performs in the video, in conjunction with the costumes and other details, work together to present a unified image by all stressing one thing: how much she deserves the listener’s love, creating the image of a “hysterical housewife”—a decidedly white trope.

Historically, of course, black women have been shut out of the housewife category. White women were housewives or homemakers, but black women who didn’t join the work force were considered lazy. Much midcentury feminist discourse had to do with freeing the housewife, and the oppression that women faced in being confined to the home. Unfortunately, this early feminism neglected important issues like race and class differences, and that some women were never financially stable enough to stay at home and live a life of relative leisure. A part of what is so dramatic about this video is Beyoncé’s engagement with the image of the homemaker as a black woman, and the inherent tension in her appropriation of a category that historically she would have been denied.

The general style of the costumes in the video manage to both reference a sort of generic “vintage” ’40s or ’50s feel, while remaining true to Beyoncé’s typical performance stylings. All of them are clear references to a “vintage style” in particular mid-50s housewife, but none of them look remotely period. Instead, each costume plays

to the cultural notion of the sexy-yet-disillusioned housewife while also playing into Beyoncé's star image. As a performer Beyoncé is known for wearing (in particular) very short shorts or bikini-style bottoms. Usually her midriff is covered, but the bottoms are cut moderately high around her buttocks. This very clear costume choice that is seen in many of her videos, and it does several things: it draws focus to Beyoncé's buttocks, which is something that she has sung about in several songs, and it also allows for a range of movement that is not possible, or as visible, in mid-length skirts, long glamorous dresses, or pants. Beyoncé is known almost as much for her animated performance, and her dancing, as she is for her singing, and so her costuming always must allow for the movement the audience expects, even if that sort of movement never occurs. In this video in particular, Beyoncé does not do the exaggerated leg movements that she is known for (in videos like "Single Ladies" for example), but she is still costumed to allow for the possibility of that movement. Perhaps in this video she does not dance in that style because it is at odds with her image of whiteness.

In this video the costumes conform to what is expected in a traditional Beyoncé music video, while still working to create an image of whiteness. The video opens with Beyoncé in denim daisy dukes, black sheer thigh-high stockings, and a red plaid top, working on a car. There is a close up of her face as she wipes her forehead and smudges it with grease. Her makeup is clearly vintage inspired, with a bold red lip, black cat-eye style liner, bold brows and blonde hair that is tied up in a kerchief, a la Rosie the Riveter. Taken together, attention is drawn to labor, and its association with dirtiness (as we see with the smudge of grease). But B. B. Homemaker abandons that labor, she goes inside after the voiceover ends and the music begins and does not return to this sort of dirty labor again. When she enters the home she becomes clean and all of her labor becomes women's work: washing dishes, ironing clothes, dusting. In fact, later in the video, she is performing what is considered one of the ideal types of woman's work—baking—and she blows flour around her kitchen, with some landing on her. This mirrors, in a way that reinforces the whiteness of her current presentation, the smudge of car grease on her face earlier in the video. Clearly, dirty work belongs outside the home, and clean, or white, work occurs inside the home.

Beyoncé also dons her symbolic whiteface by performing Bettie Page, with her trademark blunt bangs, high-waisted panties and a riding crop. She sits in her bed holding a teal telephone and alternately sobbing and screaming. She has a martini that sloshes onto the floor. Later in the video, Beyoncé, wearing a red sweater and pearls, mops the kitchen floor while singing about her many good qualities; then she is seen with gently curled blonde hair baking heart-shaped cookies; and then she is shown peeking coyly out of the shower at the camera. She wears a dress that is somehow both school-marm-ish and in the vein of the “French Maid” with cat-eye glasses, and reads a book, and dusts a long shelf full of Grammys. These images compound on each other; they combine and build upon one another until they present an overwhelming image: faux domesticity. They create the sexy, ironic housewife—ironic because she is garbed in symbolic whiteface.

Moreover, Beyoncé is the über-housewife: with her hair in curlers she washes the window and sings “[I] don’t ask no one to help me out” (Fig. 6). She informs the audience through song that she manages to put money in the bank account, she gets nasty in the bedroom, and in fact, “there’s nothing not to love about” her. These lyrics celebrate her exceptionalism, while simultaneously lamenting that she is unloved: paired with her performance of symbolic whiteface, and ideal domesticity, this can be seen as a reaction to the pressure to be a perfect wife. Beyoncé is performing the end-game of respectability politics, all of the black women who had been told that they are not as good as white women who finally perform the role better. Beyoncé is a sexier, better housewife: she is beyond perfection, seemingly the only thing at odds with her image is the undeniable fact of her blackness.

The set of “Why Don’t You Love Me” also creates an image of a stylized ’50s ideal. As with Spears’ video, the ideas of class and whiteness are created in part through the set. Both artists surround themselves with markers of whiteness. Unlike “If U Seek Amy,” the set never feels at odds with B.B. Homemaker’s persona. Interior Britney felt like she existed in spite of the set, whereas the exterior Britney and B.B. Homemaker both exist, and are comprehensible, because they are situated in a set that reinforces the image of whiteness. In “Why Don’t You Love Me?” Beyoncé is shown using an electric ringer, and hanging clothes out to dry. She is shown in a kitchen opening the oven to

reveal a pot roast that has caught on fire. She casually gardens, and carries an aluminum watering can. While these sorts of images create a “vintage” feel, that vintage look is one that is raced. This is in part because while some of the tasks that she performs, like cooking and cleaning, would have been the jobs of black “help” for upper-class white women in the ’50s. The other half of the images, like her bathing, showering, and sitting in the bed, would have absolutely been off limits to black help. Additionally, the costumes that she wears would have been unacceptable for the black help to wear. To use the house in that way as help would have been incredibly transgressive, possibly even dangerous. Because she does *all* of these things, not just the cooking and cleaning or the bathing and lounging, effectively skews the image toward symbolic whiteface.

The number of movements that are connected to the words in the song is noteworthy. At one point she sings “Keep my head in them books,” while dramatically turning a page in a book. The camera switches to another shot as she taps the side of her face with her riding crop, glancing knowingly at the camera and saying “I’m sharp.” She sings, “But you don’t care to know I’m smart,” dragging her finger down the side of her head, and then tapping it to the beat. At one point, on the line “No, no, no, there’s nothin not to love about me,” we see Beyoncé do the classic finger shake, so notable in the repertoires of almost every girl group. The movements in the video are often very punctuated. They rely on quick repetitions of small controlled motions. In one shot, she grabs her breasts and moves them up and down, but because she is holding them, the flesh, which Railton and Watson find so crucial, is stable. In another shot she rotates her hips from side to side, but the movement is very precise, and because she is holding her limbs stiff, there is no movement of the flesh.

The movements are all very rhythmic and short, and few show Beyoncé below the shoulders. If we consider Gottschild’s claim that for white dance the origin of movement is the chest, this is certainly something that we see in this video. Often, though not always, the dancing relies on the same sort of broad arm and shoulder movements that “If U Seek Amy” used. This sort of movement fits within Railton and Watson’s ideal white performance as well because these broader movements do not cause flesh to move freely as smaller movements do. For example, if Beyoncé were to shake her hips, while the movement would not be any less “precise,” her skin would continue to move after her

body stopped moving. This sort of tautness of flesh is what Railton and Watson associate with white dance performance. Broad, sweeping motions, however, are considered more “graceful” because they fit more in line with the European dance tradition. Dances like waltzes, which are considered incredibly elegant, are made up of more large movements of the body, rather than shorter and more concise movements.

I hesitate to say that Beyoncé’s movements are imprecise when they cause her flesh to wiggle, because that is wrong, but there is something about the very on-the-beat short movements that she does in this video (and in “Countdown”) that help to construct this image of whiteness. If white dancers are not moving their flesh, but just their bodies, why is that? Is it in part because we expect white artists to be skinnier? Because the “dieted and trained” body is a marker of whiteness? Or is there something in the style of motion that creates this still flesh, even when a body is in motion? I would argue that it is the latter.

In this chapter I offered readings of whiteness in the videos of two performers, one white, and one black. I considered how set, costume, and movement vocabulary created images of whiteness in both videos. I do not consider Britney Spears’ performance one of symbolic whiteface, because symbolic whiteface gains its power by its appropriation of “authentically” white performance. Nevertheless, the tropes that she performs are taken up in some ways by Beyoncé, in her symbolic whiteface performance.

Whether or not Beyoncé’s performance in “Why Don’t You Love Me” is a transgressive use of symbolic whiteface is up to debate. It is a text that works within the common discourse of whiteness, and ultimately the most challenging aspect of the imagery presented in the video is the tension between the whiteness of the images surrounding Beyoncé and the fact of her blackness. If we insist on ascribing an inherent political-ness to Beyoncé’s body, are we doing her an in-justice? Or, as we simply acknowledging the reality: that all performance is political, regardless of how it is dressed? While “Why Don’t You Love Me?” is not a clear cut example, the videos that I will examine in my third chapter are more clearly critical of whiteness, and show a change from the imagery Beyoncé used earlier in her career.

## Chapter 3: Towards A Performance of Authenticity

When I first experienced *BEYONCÉ*, it was late at night during finals week, and my roommate came into the kitchen shrieking that there was a new Beyoncé album and that I needed to look on iTunes, *now*. I opened iTunes, expecting, for some reason, to have to seek the album out: instead, on the front page all we saw was the same black background with the heavy pink font: *BEYONCÉ*. My roommate immediately bought it, despite the somewhat shocking price of \$15.99. The first thing that we experienced of this album, other than the pure shock and happiness, was “Pretty Hurts.” It is the first song on the album, and it set the tone for a massive shift in Beyoncé’s music and career. Beyoncé is an artist who we had disagreed about before: he loved her singing, I was ambivalent about it. But I had always loved her music videos, because they always managed to be stylish, sleek, and *fun*. “Pretty Hurts” is not a fun video. When we first saw Beyoncé coming out of a bathroom stall wiping her mouth after vomiting, we were a little bit shocked.

“Did she do that?” I asked, looking, probably wide-eyed, at my roommates. The answer quickly became “Yes, she did,” and we were all left thinking that this was a vastly different Beyoncé than the fun and boisterous Beyoncé we knew before.

“Pretty Hurts” sets the tone for an album that is a massive tonal shift from Beyoncé’s previous work. Not because the rest of the tracks on the album are preachy, although some of them are, but because it displays a critical eye toward the culture from which Beyoncé herself has emerged. The pain and pageantry presented in “Pretty Hurts” offer the audience sort of realness uncommon to most pop performances, but it raises some questions: what did Beyoncé have to do, to give up, to become the star that she is today?

Some of Beyoncé’s earlier work, as I have shown, can be seen as a relatively uncritical whiteface performance. While an argument can be made that the performance

of symbolic whiteface is always already a critique of whiteness, this is not, necessarily, true. The performances of whiteness in much of *BEYONCÉ*, however, are explicitly critical of white supremacy, of white cultural values, and of white beauty ideals.

How did we get here? At what point did Beyoncé transition from performing highly stylized whiteness to politicizing her blackness? I argue that *BEYONCÉ* is a dramatic stylistic shift from her earlier work. In the visual album Beyoncé re-presents herself to audiences: she is critical of whiteness, and of the white standards that she herself has upheld.

By 2013 Beyoncé had reached incredible heights of stardom, but had not released new music in several years. When she released the visual album, or *BEYONCÉ* in December 2013 it was the first major album to include music videos as an unavoidable part of the release. The interpretive power that the videos had over the songs then is not something to be forgotten. When the videos are the first exposure to a song the images that we see in the videos become inseparable from our understanding of the song. For some videos this is more important than others, none more so than the last song that I will discuss in my thesis, “No Angel.”

In this chapter I will focus on a few songs from the visual album, “Pretty Hurts,” “Mine” and “No Angel.” All of these songs were released simultaneously with the videos. I will explore the ways in which Beyoncé treats whiteness differently than she did in earlier videos. I argue that instead of performing symbolic whiteface in normative ways, Beyoncé uses several whiteface techniques to critique the white hegemonic beauty standards to which she herself has often conformed. I will also finish my chapter with an exploration of one of the thematically stranger videos in the album, “No Angel,” which, I will argue, is a dramatic shift towards using her star image politically.

Part of what made Beyoncé a compelling subject for my thesis is the changing treatment of race that I see in her work. A black artist who has once performed whiteness in a relatively normative way, but now performs race in a more transgressive way, is much more interesting than an artist who has always been transgressive, or whose narrative has not changed much. . In the visual album, Beyoncé openly, and repeatedly, addresses both her blackness and her feminism. Prior to this album Beyoncé’s blackness has been a part of her performance, as Railton and Watson argue, but she has also at



times performed normative whiteness, as I argued in my second chapter. In this album Beyoncé no longer performs whiteness as an aesthetic (as she used the housewife as an aesthetic). Instead, when she performs symbolic whiteface in this album it is a critique of the standards of whiteness that she herself is held to, and has upheld. In addition to the changing treatment of whiteness in this album, the visual album also shows a new treatment of blackness.

I want to consider the ways that these videos treat whiteness, and the ways that they treat blackness, especially in contrast to the ways in which Beyoncé's earlier performances treated race, and racialized femininity.

## Pretty Hurts

"Pretty Hurts" introduces the viewer to the album, and to a new Beyoncé character,<sup>56</sup> "Miss 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward." Houston's 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward is a historically black neighborhood, and a lot of this album brings up Beyoncé's Houston roots.<sup>57</sup> A common theme in rap music and culture is an emphasis on location; sometimes a location can be as broad as a coast (think East versus West coast rappers in the '90s) or as specific as a ward (like 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward). While Beyoncé has referenced being from Houston in some of her previous songs, *eight* of the fourteen songs on the album feature Houston in some way or another. This newfound interest in Houston is indicative of the type of persona that Beyoncé is presenting in this album. This Beyoncé is from Houston, and her blackness, and importantly, her "street cred" are important.

"Pretty Hurts" opens with a close up of Beyoncé's face: her hair is short and blonde, and she is staring directly into the camera, as though it is her mirror. Throughout the video, the audience is presented with two Beyoncé's, one at home, and one preparing for a pageant, and performing in it. The first time the audience sees Beyoncé at home, she is wearing lingerie that is a tan-colored nude that is designed for white skin. Then the scene returns to the dressing room, which is full of women, mostly black, getting ready

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<sup>56</sup> *Beyoncé - Pretty Hurts*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXXQLa-5n5w&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXXQLa-5n5w&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

for a beauty pageant. They are sucking in their stomachs, trying to fit into clothes that are just a bit too small, and trying to make sure that their clothes stay perfect. The video is referencing Beyoncé's beginnings as a pageant competitor. This video shows a progression from "Why Don't You Love Me?" in that both videos presents normative versions of whiteness, but the focus of "Pretty Hurts" not on the end product (the perfect white woman) but on the creation of the beauty that the pageant awards. "Why Don't You Love Me?" shows the end product: whiteness, always already perfect. "Pretty Hurts" shows the building of a white image, and stresses in its lyrics and images the pain and difficulty of adhering to a strict white ideal of beauty. While no one in "Pretty Hurts" ever says that they are trying to "look white" the performances of beauty in the video are all centered around looking like models, and modeling is a famously white-centric world.<sup>58</sup> Within the world of "Pretty Hurts" priority is given to girls who look more like Beyoncé—light skinned girls, with blonde hair and taut waists. Although within the world of "Pretty Hurts" (and, as the video asserts, in the real world), even Beyoncé is not enough: a professional model, Diandra Forrest, wins the pageant. She is a very thin, black model with albinism (Fig. 8). The woman who wins "Miss Pretty USA" is paler, and skinnier, than Beyoncé.

Within the video, Beyoncé is isolated from the other women both during the pageant and in training for it. The emotional landscape that is presented in the video is desolate: Beyoncé is chosen over girls with darker skin by the trainer, and then those girls no longer wish to associate with her, scooting their chairs away from her. Throughout the intro, Beyoncé and the other girls, while they are in a small room with one another, are isolated. There are shots of Beyoncé alone, posing with a wall of awards, looking forward into the camera, suggesting to the viewer that Beyoncé's peers are her awards. There is no dancing in this video, and Beyoncé has no backup dancers, as she does in many of her more popular videos. "Yoncé," another song on the album, features a particularly

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<sup>58</sup> Jenn Selby, "Jourdan Dunn on Racism in the Fashion Industry: Designers Shouldn't Be Applauded 'for Having Just One Ethnic Model,'" *The Independent*, March 7, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/jourdan-dunn-on-racism-in-the-fashion-industry-designers-shouldnt-be-applauded-for-having-just-one-ethnic-model-9176042.html>. Jordan Dunn (a famous black model, who was in the Yoncé video) is quoted in this article saying how designers think of "ethnic" sort of as a box to check.

powerful presentation of black women as a system for support and empowerment, as well as a celebration of their blackness—two things noticeably absent from this video. In many of Beyoncé’s videos backup dancers serve to amplify her, or to support her movements. By not including a squad of other women, Beyoncé’s video can focus on the feelings of aloneness that all of the pageant women experience.

The feeling of isolation is created in part by the way the sound works in the introduction: the piano melody is played as the song begins, but there is no singing. We see the women getting ready backstage, but they do not speak with each other, and they are not friendly. At one point Beyoncé tussles with another black woman over a hair dryer, as one of the few white women in the room looks on in disdain. As Beyoncé and the other pageant girl fight over the hair dryer, the loudest sound that we hear is from the blow dryer itself, and the sound of yelling is faint, as though it is being heard from a great distance. This too suggests that Beyoncé, while physically present, is disassociating from her body, and the experience. The early parts of the video combine to inform the audience that while these young women are doing an activity together, what they are doing manages to make them feel wholly alone, and unable to connect with each other. Overall, the focus on loneliness, and the divisions between the women, works to reaffirm the boundaries created by the racist beauty standards that the women are forced to pursue.

The training that the pageant women go through reinforces what Dyer writes about the embodiment of whiteness. To become white one must overcome the fallible white body with the powerful white spirit, which is echoed in the lines, “You can’t fix what you can’t see / it’s the soul that needs the surgery.” These lines on the surface address the issue of body image, but they also address the insidious nature of racist beauty ideals. To say that the two are distinct is not true: while one might argue that the song is about girls who think they aren’t pretty enough, those girls are living in a racist society that enforces a certain type of beauty.

Beyoncé’s song is framed as a “talent portion” of a pageant: she enters the stage and begins to sing “Pretty Hurts” a capella, as a panel of white male judges looks on. Beyoncé’s voice here is unsupported by music, and we hear her voice shake, sounding very raw. The men scribble notes, judging what is really a plaintive cry, letting the judges know that what she is doing, and what they are doing, is not without its consequences.

The pageant continues, however, and the moral of the song as addressed to the judges continues to be lived out in more and more obvious ways. Later in the song she works out in a full body spandex suit and a gold waist-cincher she sings, “Blonder hair, flat chest / TV says bigger is better / South Beach, sugar free / Vogue says thinner is better,” emphasizing with her actions on screen, and her words, that she is conforming to a very particular type of beauty. Many of the pageant contestants have blonde hair, and all of the black girls have long relaxed hair that have been curled into gentle waves. Blondeness is clearly a reference to white beauty ideals, and the references to the South Beach Diet and Vogue’s emphasis on thinness paired with her use of the exercise machine in that scene brings to the forefront Dyer’s claims about the dieted and trained body.

In a section that shows the training and preparation for pageants, and modeling, Shaun Ross, a famous black model with albinism, weighs and measures Beyoncé, and seemingly informs her that she still weighs too much (Fig. 9). She is given a number and then sent back to the other aspiring models. She jostles to be at the front of the crowd of women, and Ross comes up to her again, slapping her thighs and stomach, and forcefully lengthening her neck. Beyoncé tenses her muscles, to keep her skin from wiggling, providing a wonderful image of her, a black woman in a white world, attempting to present the ideal of white female sexuality, with its “rigid” flesh.<sup>59</sup> Backstage at the pageant, Beyoncé is seen with another performer forcing herself to vomit (Fig. 10). This section, as well as the section showing her working out, demonstrates to the audience that Beyoncé feels a need to be skinner to present an ideal body (Fig. 11). She is showing mastery, albeit a twisted and damaging kind, over her own body, in what is certainly an embodiment of white supremacist beauty.

Within the pageant girls there is a strong emphasis on moving in unison. When they wave, they wave together; and when they turn, they turn together. Beyond in synch, their movements are identical, practiced. The sense of “sameness” is strong; the women all have the same smile, and they carry themselves and move on stage in a way that was taught to them all. This is not to argue that the women look the same, but rather that they are all taught an identical way of carrying their bodies, that is appropriate for the pageant stage. It brings to mind Martha Reeves’ interview about her training at Motown; she too

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<sup>59</sup> Railton and Watson, 102.

learned a new way of moving. This sort of training is performative too, and just as it is an example of gender performativity, it is also racial performativity. The women who are trained to be pageant competitors cannot behave in ways that white people read as “raced,” as most of the judges are white.

After Beyoncé struggles with the question of “What is your aspiration in life?” she is seen trashing her room full of trophies, in what we can assume is a flash-forward or a fantasy. This sequence is interspersed with her struggle to articulate her aspiration, with images of her going into the bathroom to vomit, and with a white man giving her botox injections. Before the pageant winner is announced Beyoncé concludes that she wants “to be happy.” As the video comes to a close Beyoncé and Diandra Forest, are brought to the front of the stage, the finalists in the pageant. The camera cuts to Beyoncé in another room, smashing all her trophies, exhibiting a freedom that she had not shown before. Forest, as Miss Shaolin, wins the competition, and Beyoncé applauds and kisses her cheeks. Even with all of Beyoncé’s efforts, the woman who won the competition still had lighter skin, blonder hair, and was, in fact, thinner. Ultimately, while the video claims to be about what women to do be beautiful, it is also about women trying to conform to white beauty standards. Unlike earlier videos, which seem to take this process for granted, “Pretty Hurts” questions to process and thus, perhaps, the result.

“Pretty Hurts” shows the ways that whiteness is created by black women, and lays before the audience some of the ways that these types of performances hurt the performers. While “Pretty Hurts” comes across as a simple, moralizing, song (and indeed, it is not hugely complex) the video creates a more nuanced message. While the song tells us that it is the pursuit of beauty that hurts women, the video demonstrates for the audience that it is not just an endless chasing of beauty, but rather a struggle to look more white, and to appeal to a *white* sense of beauty, that hurts black women. The video shows women going through the steps that Dyer gives as examples of ways that white people prove their own whiteness. “Pretty Hurts” is also one of the most straightforward videos. It shows the suffering involved in creating a character that Beyoncé has performed many times before. I hope that by reconsidering the process of achieving white beauty, the song also questions the supremacy of that ideal.

## Mine

The song opens on the pieta, with Beyoncé as the Virgin Mary, and a black woman who has been painted bright white as Jesus.<sup>60</sup> The video on a whole is incredibly beautiful, and shockingly well composed. Almost any still taken from the video comes out perfect, well framed, and flawlessly lit. The attention to composition in the video is remarkable, reinforcing that “Mine,” is not just a music video, but an art piece. “Mine” also *engages* with art, so its sharp and clean beauty is a choice that was made to reinforce the “artistic” elements of the video.

In discussing the video for “Mine” I will examine the use of the technique Feadra Carpenter calls optic whiteface, and I will consider artistic reference as a tool to appropriate whiteness. This appropriation is political, as all appropriation is, but in this case the politics of Beyoncé playing the Madonna serves to open up the roles that black women are historically denied access to by “traditional” art. The video also creates a visual metaphor relating white classical art (like Michelangelo) with whiteness. By interjecting herself into high art, Beyoncé claims a space for black women in an ultra white space, but she also questions what they have to do to get there. “Mine” asks the audience: do black women need to wear whiteface to have their work considered high art, or classically beautiful?

The Jesus figure painted in pure white feels much more like a classic use of whiteface performance. This optic whiteface functions almost exactly as Carpenter describes in *Coloring Whiteness*: drawing attention to the impossibility of pure whiteness. The woman’s whiteface looks unnatural, for all that it is bright pure white, it is clear to the audience that the performer’s skin itself is not white. As the video progresses this woman is the primary dancer, and is shown in a variety of settings, performing rigorous dances. As the video progresses we can see that some of the white paint is starting to wear off, revealing the natural hue of her skin. While we never see the dancer’s true skin, we see hints of it: darkness behind the artificial white of the paint.

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<sup>60</sup> *Beyoncé - Mine Ft. Drake*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDvu1ehPq0g&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDvu1ehPq0g&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

The video for “Mine” opens in an unmarked black space. It is an empty space, with the performers seemingly floating in it. After the title, the song starts with Beyoncé wearing a white and pale grey structured bodice, and a white head covering. Her legs are spread wide, and her hands are resting, palm up, on her knees. She looks peaceful, and all of her movements are still and controlled. Resting her head on Beyoncé’s thigh is a black woman who has been painted completely, blindingly, white, in an example of what Carpenter calls “Optic Whiteface.” This woman is covered only by a white cloth draped across her, covering her breasts to the tops of her thighs. She is in the position of Christ (Fig. 12). This shot is a recreation of the pieta, a depiction of Jesus in Mary’s arms after he was taken down from the cross. This image has been recreated a number of times, but Michelangelo’s rendition is the best known (Fig. 13). The dress that Beyoncé is wearing has the structural square neckline that is often associated with renaissance clothing, and her choice to cover her head mirrors the common depiction of the Virgin Mary wearing a headscarf or shawl of some kind. The Christ figure she supports is nude, as Christ is depicted in this category of images, except for the bit of fabric, which in most images of the Pieta covers exclusively the pelvis, but in this case covers the breasts as well. Amongst all this blinding whiteness—their clothing, scarves, and the woman’s painted skin—one thing stands out as not white: Beyoncé herself.

To those familiar with a European Christian tradition, the pieta is a well-known image. Beyoncé’s use of costume, coloring, and most significantly, pose, to create this association is powerful. What is especially powerful is the creation of an artificially white Jesus figure, and an “authentically” black Madonna. In an album that is largely about the desire to be seen as *both* a mother and a sexual being, the Madonna is a challenging choice. The Virgin Mary has been cast exclusively as a mother, as virginity, as purity, for two thousand years. For Beyoncé to perform that image, in an album that often references the pleasure of sex, as well as the painful aspects of relationships, like jealousy and loss, complicates the figure of the Madonna.

Beyoncé and the woman in white are occasionally surrounded by dancers, who are covered in flowing fabric in natural dusty looking hues. The dancers all wear matching blonde wigs. They twirl and jump, and move their scarves in the air, but they are all moving in slow motion. They have been artificially slowed down, but they never

cease moving, which accentuates the stillness of Beyoncé and the woman on the floor. Even when Beyoncé is also moving, she seems much more still and in control when contrasted to the backup dancers, because the fabric surrounding them is so voluminous, and extends their movements past the natural limits of their bodies. Beyoncé and the woman she supports become the perfectly still center, the Madonna and child. Later in this sequence the camera cuts away from Beyoncé, and when we see her again she is holding a white plaster mask of her own face, providing another example of optic whiteface within the text.

The white mask that Beyoncé holds is initially just in her hand, not on her face, offering the audience a literalization of the symbolic whiteface that Beyoncé has worn before. The image is heavy-handed, despite being slow, and deliberate, and elegant. The white mask can be seen as a reference to the well-known Paul Lawrence Dunbar poem “We Wear The Mask,” allowing the audience to see the ways in which her true self has been hidden behind the white mask of pop.<sup>61</sup> This use of optic whiteface also draws the audience’s attention to whiteness’ place in the image she is presenting: the pieta. By donning a white mask while recreating the pieta Beyoncé creates a direct link between whiteface, and artists of color engaging with the western artistic canon. The image also brings to mind Beyoncé’s own treatment of whiteness, as something that she is able to put on, and then remove.

Slowly, as the song continues, Beyoncé raises the mask to cover her own face. On the line “We’re takin this a little too far,” the video cuts away again. The image of the pieta does not occur again in the video. Instead, the bulk of the remainder of the video takes place in some sandy place. It is dusty, and the sand forms vast dunes, it seems to stretch out forever, leaving it unclear if it is desert or beach. Curiously, Railton and Watson described a place much like this one when they were touting the “naturalness” of the setting and of Beyoncé’s performance.<sup>62</sup> They argued that the setting showed nature encroaching on the performers, and thus imbuing them with some of its qualities, or associations. “Mine” serves to demonstrate that an outdoor setting does not need to be a

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<sup>61</sup> “We Wear the Mask by Paul Laurence Dunbar : The Poetry Foundation.” Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173467>.

<sup>62</sup> Railton and Watson, 98.



natural one. This particular area, because of its stark coloring, and unclear location seems alien, like something from another world. The use of plumes of dark smoke, with the whiteface dancer walking through them, gave it the look of something deep underwater, like a thermal vent, or from above ground, a war zone.

Additionally, Beyoncé is never once seen in the desert/beach that much of the video was filmed in. While there is this natural component, she is shown only in the black space, completely detached from everything around her, and wholly isolated from the dancers in the desert. “Mine” has many white performers, unlike the majority of the videos on the album. The ones who interact the most with nature: either on rock-faces, or surrounded by waves, or flying sand, are almost all white. This is the type of action that occurs outside of the body, that goes beyond dance and costume that Railton and Watson identified as a part of the “ideal black” music video performance. They argue that there is a longstanding tradition of associating blackness with nature. This video reframes those associations.

The video is full of references to art, both classical and more modern. It opens with a restaging of Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, and there is a couple that appears later on in the video that references Rene Magritte’s “The Lovers” (Fig. 14, 15). There is a shot towards the end that features Beyoncé’s outstretched arm touching a black hand in a scene that could be seen as a reference to Michelangelo’s “The Creation of Adam” (Fig. 16, 17). The inclusion of this reference reiterates the concept of Beyoncé-as-holy-figure, placing her either as God, or as God’s first creation, and, importantly, rendering those figures as black instead of white. By including these images multiple times, they gain power. The use of optic whiteface on the Christ figure, and the visible wear of the white body paint throughout the video, also works to emphasize the artificiality of the historically white representations of these figures.

The artfulness of the video renders it cold and distant. It is indeed the opposite of the fleshiness that Railton and Watson say is typical of the “ideal” black female music video performance. This artistic coldness is not clean—there is ink smeared on Beyoncé’s back, sand kicked up by the dancers, and splashes from bodies falling into water—but it is still sterile in a way. The entire piece is presented as artificial and staged. It feels as though the lighting is *too* perfect, and the frames *too* cleanly composed. At one

point the Christ figure walks across the sand dunes, with the sky darkening behind her, as two deep black plumes burst forth into the sky. The bright whiteness of her skin stands in stark contrast to the unnatural blackness of the clouds, making them both look more artificial. The pairing is, overall, uncanny and bizarre. The contrast of deep black and artificial whiteness is also one way that the video makes the sandy setting of the video unnatural.

“Mine,” takes a complicated, confusing approach to whiteness. The video for “Mine” shows several kinds of whiteface: symbolic whiteface, created through the association of Beyoncé with the Virgin Mary; and optic whiteface, seen both on Beyoncé, and the dancer playing the Jesus role. The symbolic whiteface is also created through references to well-known pieces of art. By referencing a white discourse, inserting black bodies into that discourse, and recreating famous white images with black performers, the song reconsiders the way that we see art. The content of the song does not immediately speak to the form of the video, which poses some interpretive problems, but despite this, the video creates a cohesive image. “Mine” is an art video, both a beautiful and elegant parody of high art, and also an active engagement with it. “Mine” exists in a complex space in part because it is critiquing the concept of “high art” even as it uses those images to communicate that critique.

## No Angel

“No Angel” is one of the most political, and under-discussed songs on *BEYONCÉ*.<sup>63</sup> The video was filmed in Houston’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward, by a director called @lilinternet, who was chosen because of his immersive documentary filming style.<sup>64</sup> The video for “No Angel” shows Beyoncé on screen much less than any of the other videos on the album. In music videos featuring a single singer, it is common for them not only to

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<sup>63</sup> *Beyoncé - No Angel*, 2014,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7PPjEB2QZQ&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7PPjEB2QZQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>64</sup> “We Talked to @LILINTERNET About Directing Beyoncé’s ‘No Angel’ Video,” *NOISEY*, December 20, 2013, <http://noisey.vice.com/blog/lil-internet-beyonce-no-angel-video>. “And yes, the Beyoncé liner notes do credit him as ‘@LILINTERNET.’”

always be on screen, but also to be in the center of the frame. In this video there are long stretches without Beyoncé appearing on screen, instead, the citizens of Houston are center-screen. While most videos from the album focus on Beyoncé, in “No Angel” we get the sense that we are cruising around Houston, and while Beyoncé is our introduction, her presence is less important.

The title of the song is particularly poignant, and even pointed, when we take into account the narrative often surrounding the death of young black men: that they were “no angel,” and so their murders are somehow more excusable. A *Vanity Fair* article provides a succinct set of examples that show the racial divisions between what it takes to be “no angel.” Al Capone, one of the Columbine killers, and a Nazi soldier are among the whites who *the New York Times* has described as “no angel” Black men and boys, however, are often given the epithet for much less: for Michael Jackson, it was grabbing his crotch on stage, and for one boy, killed in 1986 by a group of white men, “no angel” was the excuse *the New York Times* offered Americans for his murder. Of course the term has been used much more recently: in the trial against Trayvon Martin’s killer George Zimmerman, the defense portrayed Martin as “no angel.” *The New York Times* famously called Mike Brown “no angel” after his death at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson.<sup>65</sup> By choosing to focus the song on lower-class black communities in Houston, Beyoncé is intervening in an ongoing discourse about the presumed guilt of black people, especially black men.

“No Angel” is, lyrically, a relatively standard pop ballad, although it has a sparser and more bass-heavy beat, reminiscent of the southern-rap style called “trap.” Recognizable features of trap music include a powerful bass line and dramatic orchestration, both of which are heard to a certain extent in “No Angel.” The lyrics focus on Beyoncé’s knowledge of her own imperfections, and those of her lover, saying that their mutual imperfections make their relationship more rewarding. Thematically, much of *BEYONCÉ* features songs about Beyoncé’s own imperfections and humanness, so in that regard the song fits with the overall project of the album. Where the song differs

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<sup>65</sup> John Eligon, “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling With Problems and Promise,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html>.

from the general theme of the album is her use of the video to resituate herself in relation to the poorer people in her hometown. She uses this video to show several different sides of the city, with a focus on the lives of poorer black residents of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward.

Beyoncé's choice to use the song "No Angel," a traditional pop ballad, to talk about the murder of young black men reframes Beyoncé culturally. In this song Beyoncé claims the phrase "no angel" and applies it to herself. This is particularly powerful considering the massive popularity that Beyoncé has achieved in recent years. As I demonstrated in my introduction, Beyoncé is someone who people adore, almost worship, and so for her to present herself as "no angel" and to align herself specifically with the black people murdered by white cops and vigilantes, raises the question of what an "angel" really is. When Beyoncé claims in the context of this video that she is "no angel," she effectively asks the listener if her life is worth more than the lives of the myriad black people who have been killed by law enforcement. And, if her life is worth more, why? She too is no angel.

The video opens with a sunrise over a city skyline: the city of Houston, Beyoncé's hometown. As the sun rises, we hear white noise, then, as the beat begins, we cut to a new shot, taken through a rusting chain-link fence, of two black boys sitting on the front steps of a worn-looking porch. The title of the song is hand painted onto a cinder block building: it is presented in a list of things that one cannot do there: it reads "NO" and then underneath, with all but angel struck through: "angel, gambling, trespassing, loitering, drug selling." This image is typical of a certain type of southern store, common in inner-city neighborhoods. The hand-painted sign and cinderblocks quickly establish the setting. This video is not about any part of Houston—it is about the black side of Houston, and a relatively poor side of Houston at that. The shots of the children also let us know another focus of the video: black boys, with older men who might be brothers and fathers, and together, as children.

Beyoncé herself appears very little in this video. She wears only three outfits: one, a worn-looking jersey that reads "Houston," one that is denim cut-offs and a t-shirt, and one with the sort of glam look that is more typical of this album: an all-white ensemble, with what looks like a bathing suit with a white fur-trimmed coat over it. When she wears that look she is alone on the screen, she stands out starkly from the city: she wears it to

pose in front of small homes with peeling paint, and she casts herself as an outsider with that costume. Her outsider status is important to the video—it is one of the only videos on the album that is not about *her*. Instead, Beyoncé uses “No Angel” to show the humanity of the community in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward. Her audience would, by and large, never have been exposed to this view of Houston outside of this video. Her depiction of this black community in Houston is generous, laden with the simple message of the song: in spite of, or because of, their imperfections, the people in this community are worth loving.

In the first half or so of the video there are a number of shots of black men and boys (Fig. 18). They are shown in a number of settings, seemingly wherever the film crew found them. Many of them are shown in isolation, standing alone, with relaxed faces, but some make faces, some smile, some show their jewelry. We see a shot of a bright red car, with a lot of chrome detailing, and a trunk that opens to reveal neon lettering at the top that reads “4<sup>th</sup> WARD” and underneath a large plaque that reads “RIP Cheeto Pat” (Fig. 19). This is one of the first memorials that the audience sees, but it is not the last (Fig. 20, 21, 22). The video goes on to show shots of Section 8 housing, and women a group of women and girls sitting on the steps of a porch. There are many shots of young boys, some of whom are interacting with older men, and some who are shown alone. Some are serious, and some are beaming.

The style of the video is reminiscent of portraiture, and while this video does not depict everything, it does show a portrait, of sorts, of this part of the city. Unlike many Beyoncé music videos, there is no real narrative, and there is no dancing. Instead we see things like men standing in front of their businesses, high-school students playing football, people making food, and the insides of cluttered homes. Not every image plays to the same idea of black manhood, or some abstract concept of an “ideal” blackness. Instead, the audience sees a variety of people simply living their lives. A section of the video about halfway through shows a car show in the neighborhood, where people display the modifications that they have made to their cars. These cars are known as SLABs, or “Slow, Loud and Bangin” and this car culture is something Houston is known

for.<sup>66</sup> All of the cars are gleaming, and the trunks shake with the power of subwoofers. There are cars with bullhorns on the front, and cars with ornate chrome hubcaps. These cars are things of pride for their owners, and many of them have modifications that offer a memorial to a lost friend, or family member.

The video depicts the death and violence in the community with calmness and distance. There is a shot of a man slowly lifting his shirt above his bellybutton, revealing many deep scars where he had presumably been stabbed. The image feels detached and observational, as though the man is revealing a part of himself to the audience, but it does not feel sensational—instead it almost feels incidental. The video is presented as a documentary of life in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward, and this is a part of that life. There is a shot of a couple: the woman wearing a shirt that has been airbrushed with an image saying “In Loving Memory” with a picture of a happy little boy (Fig. 21). The next shot shows the man posing next to his car, his arms crossed, as the trunk of his car lifts, showing a neon sign that reads “RIP KENO” and underneath shows a picture of a boy’s face (Fig. 22). These paired images really emphasize the significance of the title of the song. This is the type of child who might have been called “no angel” after he died, yet we as the audience see his smiling face, and the brightness of his eyes, and the simple devastation of his parents.

By framing the video as Beyoncé presenting Houston’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward to the audience, we are invited to imagine her differently. This video introduces a new activist side of Beyoncé that was unknown to audiences before. The message of “No Angel” is extremely relevant in the face of the current critical conversation about police brutality against black communities. This video positions Beyoncé as a camera, pointed towards the people her white audiences might think of as less angelic, less worth living. In the end, while the video’s tone is calm, it seems to be calling white America’s bluff. It asks us, what is different about Beyoncé? She presents herself as someone who made it out of this neighborhood (whether or not this is *true* is irrelevant) and become someone glamorous and desirable. If Beyoncé could come from this background and become

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<sup>66</sup> Nick De La Torre, “Houston’s Hip Hop Car Culture,” *Houston Chronicle*, accessed April 25, 2015, <http://www.chron.com/cars/slideshow/Houston-039-s-hip-hop-car-culture-72362.php>.

Beyoncé, what is to stop others from emerging from similar backgrounds to achieve greatness? In the context of this video, the clear answer is death and discrimination.

## Conclusion

“Pretty Hurts,” “Mine,” and “No Angel,” all show different forms of critique. They are incredibly varied as far as filmic style and content; they even vary in the ways that they depict Beyoncé. Together, however, these videos offer us a new vision of Beyoncé, and of stardom. They critique whiteness, and the performances of whiteness that helped bring Beyoncé to where she is now. “Pretty Hurts” critiques the white beauty standards that Beyoncé has been guilty of reinforcing. The video presents to the audience a new goal; instead of beauty, ask, “What is my aspiration in life?” While the video is preachy, and somewhat simplistic, it demonstrates the distance that black women feel from each other when trying to live up to racist beauty ideals.

“Mine” interjects Beyoncé into art history, one of the bastions of whiteness. The use of optic whiteface in the video as well as the use of unnatural looking nature makes whiteness strange. The images present a whiteness that is both historical and alien. “No Angel” then, instead of subtly critiquing whiteness, offers to audiences a perspective that had not been seen from Beyoncé previously: a political side. “No Angel” presents us with images of the reality of life in Houston’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward, and asks us if we are such angels that we can judge these people unworthy of life.





# Conclusion

I hope that by asking ourselves how Beyoncé performs race we can open ourselves to other questions: how do we perform our races? How do our performances change? What do these shifting performances mean for our lives? What are the implications of whiteness going beyond skin, and into the ways that we perform ourselves? And, finally, what are the political implications of creative appropriations of whiteness?

In this thesis I explored the dynamics of racial performance in music videos, with a focus on Beyoncé's performance. I attempted to demonstrate that racial performance is not linked solely to assigned race, and rather that it is possible to perform whiteness for different purposes, and in different ways. Beyoncé is a fascinating example for this type of study because as a pop performer her racial performance changes slowly, but very visibly. I chose *BEYONCÉ* as my ultimate focus because the shift in her career, and the significant change in her performances of race can be seen so clearly in the visual album. While some may see this as a thesis about Beyoncé, I intend it to be a thesis about whiteness, that uses Beyoncé's performances to explore the variety of performances of whiteness.

Critically, whiteness is not some static fact, and perhaps it is not a fact at all. It is, instead, strings of behavior, a web, as I wrote in my introduction. To consider whiteness as it is performance by those who are not white is intended to trouble the waters of race. If we can see "whiteness" and white tropes independently of white bodies, I hope it will be easier to see how it is performed by white people. This endeavor is particularly important for those of us who are white. Being able to separate out strands of whiteness, and consider how they form what we often see as an immutable whole

I also hope that this thesis works on a smaller scale to demonstrate some of the merits of thinking critically about pop culture, and of applying performance studies and critical race studies to pop performance. Pop touches the lives of so many people, and to dismiss it as fluff is, I hope I have demonstrated, unwise. All too often in academic settings we treat pop culture with disdain—as though it is for the foolish, or those

incapable of deep thought. But pop *is* important, it shapes the world that we live in, and reflects our values back to us.

If, one day, we consider pop a worthwhile subject, and value the conversations in living rooms, streets, and cafeterias as much as we value the discourse of the lecture hall, perhaps then academic interests can reflect the lived experiences of the people we theorize about.

## Appendix A: Images



Fig. 1 Beyoncé as robot  
Sweet Dreams, Beyoncé, 2008, Video.



Fig. 2 A Coy Gaze  
If U Seek Amy, Britney Spears, 2008, Video.



Fig. 3 “And I got ass”  
Why Don’t You Love Me?, Beyoncé, 2009, Video.



Fig. 4 Pristine Britney, Pristine House, Dirty Men  
If U Seek Amy, Britney Spears, 2008, Video.



Fig. 5 The Perfect Mother

If U Seek Amy, Britney Spears, 2008, Video.



Fig. 6 As B.B. Homemaker

Why Don't You Love Me?, Beyoncé, 2009, Video.





Fig. 7 “Don’t have to ask no one to help me out”  
Why Don’t You Love Me?, Beyoncé, 2009, Video.



Fig. 8 Diandra Forrest looks at how thin she is  
Pretty Hurts, Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 9 Shaun Ross Measures Beyoncé  
Pretty Hurts, Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 10 Beyoncé vomits  
Pretty Hurts, Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 11 The dieted and trained body  
Pretty Hurts, Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 12 Whiteface Pietà  
"Mine," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.





Fig. 13 Pietà, Michelangelo  
1499, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Marble, 68.5 x 76.8"



Fig. 14 The Lovers  
"Mine," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 15 The Lovers, René Magritte  
1928. Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, Oil on canvas, 21 3/8 x 28 7/8"



Fig. 16 The Creation of Adam  
"Mine," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.

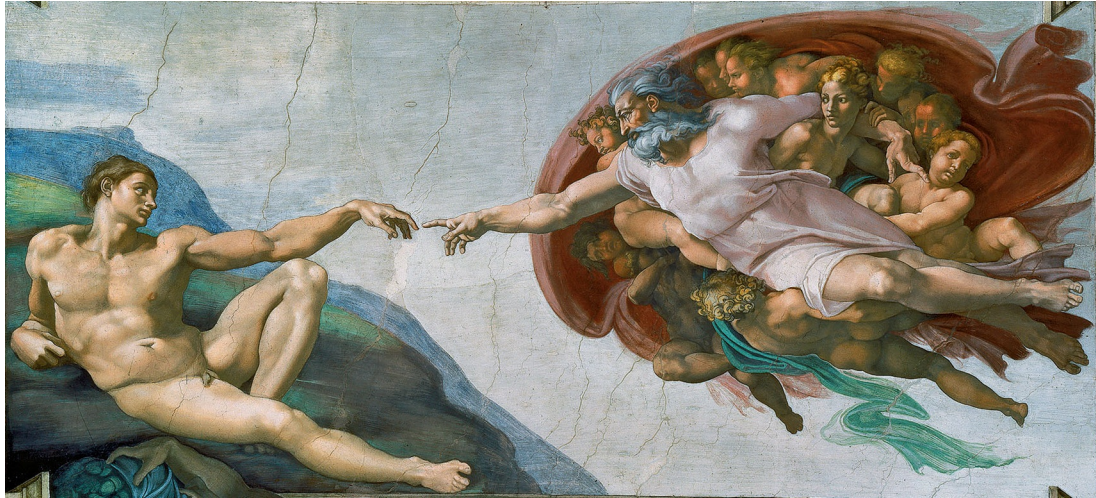


Fig. 17 The Creation of Adam, Michelangelo  
1512. The Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Fresco, 15' 9" x 7' 7"



Fig. 18 Fairfax Natives  
"No Angel," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



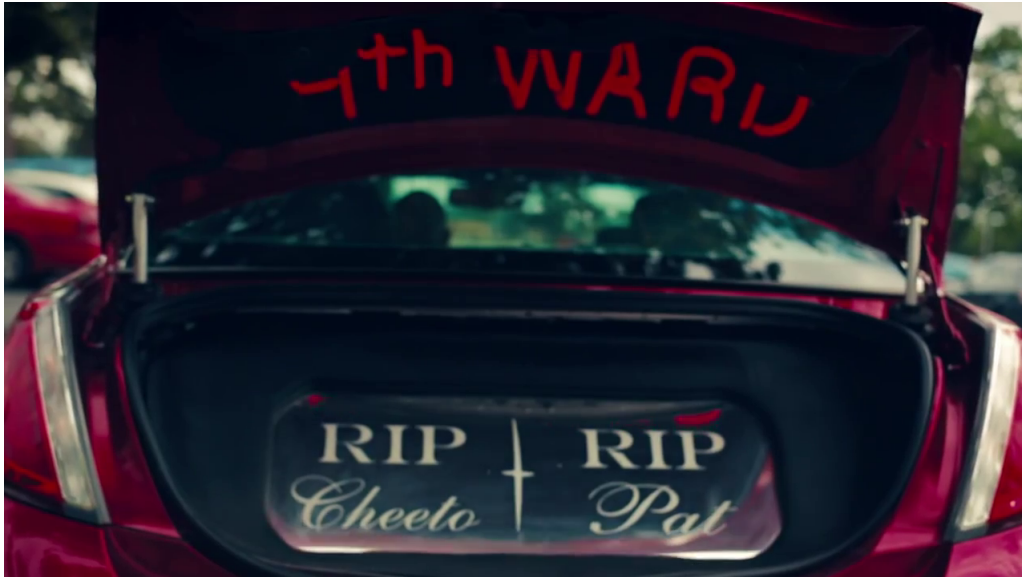


Fig. 19 RIP Cheeto Pat

"No Angel," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 20 RIP Eman

"No Angel," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 21 In Loving Memory  
 "No Angel," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



Fig. 22 RIP Keno  
 "No Angel," Beyoncé, 2013, Video.



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